

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

July, 2009

Here at the summer break (Happy Fourth!) we celebrate an American patriot of old and welcome a new one. We contemplate the vastness of space, the enormity of the Catholic church's sins and its defenders' mendacities. A six-year old explains fake science and we test our political morality, deny God (The Sequel), ask WWJD? twice, consider green (both senses of the word) veggies and lecture the citizens of East Ramapo. But first, we lament a mess in our own back yard.— JR

WHAT A MESS

From a June 2 Center for Inquiry press release, "Leadership Changes Announced by the Center for Inquiry":

The Center for Inquiry and its affiliate organizations, the Council for Secular Humanism and the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, announced today that in support of its two-year succession plan Dr. Paul Kurtz, the visionary leader and founder of all three organizations, will become chair emeritus. Kurtz in this capacity will continue as a voting member of the boards of directors for the balance of his terms ending in 2013. In his new role Kurtz will have time to concentrate on writing and numerous public speaking engagements on behalf of the Center for Inquiry as the founder and face of the organization.

From a June 3 e-mail by Paul Kurtz:

May I set the historical record straight? I was unceremoniously ousted as Chairman of the Center for Inquiry/Transnational on June 1, 2009. It is totally untruthful to state that I was not. The effort by the CEO to cover up this deed offends any sense of fairness and I do not wish to be party to that deception. It was a palace coup clear and simple by those who wish to seize immediate power.

I founded the various organizations of the Center for Inquiry (CFI), including CSICOP (now the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry or CSI) and the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) and I labored tirelessly for years. I served without any compensation whatsoever for over 33 years, devoting my life blood to these organizations and the high ideals that they represent. ...

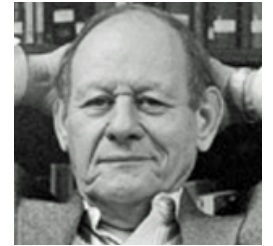
The Board of Directors removed me as Chairman (I am "Chairman Emeritus") and stripped me of any authority or responsibility to see that the Center for Inquiry continues to grow during the current economic crisis. I had agreed to a succession plan, but it was supposed to be a gradual process. I am concerned that the direction of CFI will be changed.

I should further state that at one point, the Board majority notified me that if I did not agree with my ouster that they would eject me from my office in our world headquarters in Amherst, New York, a building that I designed and raised the funds to build. ...

I have agreed to remain on the Board for now—though I feel completely demoralized by the power grab—after a degrading Inquisition conducted by the Board a year ago and my final Expulsion from an organization, which I love dearly, and whose future survival I fear is now endangered. – Paul Kurtz

Comment:

This may be a classic case of he-said/they-said, but at our across-the-state distance from Amherst, the behavior of the Board seems unworthy of a humanist organization. Whatever Paul Kurtz's "sins" (if indeed there are any), he is the grand old man of modern humanism; without him there wouldn't be a CFI, a CSI or, most important to us, a Council for Secular Humanism (CSH). Whatever the reasons for their actions, the Board of CSH has acted terribly. – John Rafferty



*Paul Kurtz, Founder,
The Council for
Secular Humanism*

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THIS I BELIEVE: JULY 4

Andrew Sullivan

(Originally written in 2005, before he became a US citizen)

Today is as good a day as any to remind myself why I love this country, even as I wait to see if I will be allowed to stay here:

I believe in life. I believe in reassuring it as a mystery that will never be fully understood, as a sanctity that should never be destroyed, as an invitation to experience now what can only be remembered tomorrow. I believe in its indivisibility, in the intimate connection between the newest bud of spring and the flicker in the eye of a patient near death, between the athlete in his prime and the quadriplegic vet, between the fetus in the womb and the mother who bears another life in her own body.

I believe in liberty. I believe that within every soul lies the capacity to reach for its own good, that within every physical body there endures an unalienable right to be free from coercion. I believe in a system of government that places that liberty at the center of its concerns, that enforces the law solely to protect that freedom, that sides with the individual against the claims of family and tribe and church and nation, that sees innocence before guilt and dignity before stigma.

I believe in the right to own property, to maintain it against the benign suffocation of a government that would tax more and more of it away. I believe in freedom of speech and of contract, the right to offend and blaspheme, as well as the right to convert and bear witness. I believe that these freedoms are connected — the freedom of the fundamentalist and the atheist, female and male, black and Asian, gay and straight.

I believe in the pursuit of happiness. Not its attainment, nor its final definition, but its pursuit. I believe in the journey, not the arrival; in conversation, not monologues; in multiple questions rather than any single answer. I believe in the struggle to remake ourselves and challenge each other in the spirit of eternal forgiveness, in the awareness that none of us knows for sure what happiness truly is, but each of us knows the imperative to keep searching. I believe in the possibility of surprising joy, of serenity through pain, of homecoming through exile.

And I believe in a country that enshrines each of these three things, a country that promises nothing but the promise of being more fully human, and never guarantees its success.

In that constant failure to arrive—implied at the very beginning—lies the possibility of a permanently fresh start, an old newness, a way of revitalizing ourselves and our civilization in ways few foresaw and one day many will forget. But the point is now.

And the place is America.

THE DISGRACE OF THE IRISH CATHOLIC CHURCH

PZ Myers, Pharyngula

(From alternet.org, May 21, 2009)

Grim tales are emerging from an investigation of the Irish Catholic Church. For years, they've been running reform schools which sound more like hellish work camps, where sadistic priests were given free rein. I found it ironic that some of these workhouses were used to make religious paraphernalia, like rosaries, that were sold to the faithful. I wonder how many Hail Marys have been said on beads assembled by child-slaves who were raped or beaten as a reward? It does add a rather sinister gloss to Catholic prayers.

A quick summary of the findings, which are at <http://www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/>: a history of official cover-ups of pedophiles within the church since the 1930s ... a pattern of beatings, abuse, and molestation in church-run workhouses ... "endemic" molestation and rape at the boys' workhouses ... ritualized beatings and personal abuse and denigration ... kids falsely told that their parents or siblings were dead ... a continuing insistence on protecting the child molesters in the church's ranks ... and whistleblowers accused of being "money-seeking liars."

The Irish government cut a deal with the Catholic Church to cap their losses to lawsuits at \$175 million, which is only a tiny part of the full cost.

Many of the perpetrators of abuse are now elderly and in retirement, no doubt in homes that are run with more care and concern than they gave. The institutions are dying out as the priests age, and a good thing, too.

Can we stop equating religion and morality now? They never seem to have much to do with one another.

THE MENDACITY OF BILL DONOHUE OF THE CATHOLIC LEAGUE

(Reprinted from Panviews, newsletter of PA Nonbelievers, Inc., June/July, 2009)

Catholic League President Bill Donohue, dismissing the findings of a report alleging decades of child abuse in 100 Irish Catholic institutions caring for orphaned, delinquent and abandoned children, "explained":

Regarding sexual abuse, "kissing," and "non-contact including voyeurism" (e.g., what [the report] labels as "inappropriate sexual talk") make the grade as constituting sexual abuse. Moreover, one-third of the cases involved "inappropriate fondling and contact" ... The Irish report suffers from conflating minor instances of abuse with serious ones, thus demeaning the latter.

What the report actually says about the "minor" abuse:

Witnesses reported sexual assaults in the forms of vaginal and anal rape, oral/genital contact, digital penetration, penetration by an object, masturbation and other forms of inappropriate contact, including molestation and kissing. Witnesses also reported several forms of non-contact sexual abuse including indecent exposure, inappropriate sexual talk, voyeurism and forced public nudity.

Mr. Donohue was outraged that so many charges were being amassed against the Church when only 12 percent of the abuse cases documented in the Irish study involved "actual" rape. "By cheapening rape," he wailed, "the report demeans the big victims. But, of course, there is a huge market for such distortions, especially when the accused is the Catholic Church."

Donohue is obviously completely oblivious to his own ghastly distortion in desperately trying to continue the decades of cover-ups by the Church.

JESUS & MO ON IRISH CATHOLIC ABUSE

Jesus: The Irish Catholic child abuse report is just horrific. My heart goes out to them. After all these years, to have your wounds opened up to the public, and for what? It takes real courage to face up to those terrible facts from the past, but with faith they can overcome the pain and the shame and emerge stronger for it.

Barmaid: But many of those thousands abused as children have lost their faith now.

Jesus: I'm not talking about the children. I'm talking about the Church – there is still vital work to be done, defending the vulnerable and the unborn.

Mohammed: Jesus Christ!

15 ANSWERS TO CREATIONIST NONSENSE

John Rennie — Part 11

(The "15 Answers," from ScientificAmerican.com in 2002, have been appearing occasionally in PIQUE. Careful readers will be aware that "Answers" 8-9-10 in March were incorrectly labeled 5-6-7. Sorry about that. – JR)

11. Natural selection might explain microevolution, but it cannot explain the origin of new species and higher orders of life.

Evolutionary biologists have written extensively about how natural selection could produce new species. For instance, in the model called allopatry, developed by Ernst Mayr of Harvard University, if a population of organisms were isolated from the rest of its species by geographical boundaries, it might be subjected to different selective pressures. Changes would accumulate in the isolated population. If those changes became so significant that the splinter group could not or routinely would not breed with the original stock, then the splinter group would be "reproductively isolated" and on its way toward becoming a new species.

Natural selection is the best studied of the evolutionary mechanisms, but biologists are open to other possibilities as well. Biologists are constantly assessing the potential of unusual genetic mechanisms for causing speciation or for producing complex features in organisms. Lynn Margulis of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and others have persuasively argued that some cellular organelles, such as the energy-generating mitochondria, evolved through the symbiotic merger of ancient organisms. Thus, science welcomes the possibility of evolution resulting from forces beyond natural selection. Yet those forces must be natural; they cannot be attributed to the actions of mysterious creative intelligences whose existence, in scientific terms, is unproved.

IS YOUR MORALITY CONSERVATIVE OR LIBERAL? TAKE THE TEST TO FIND OUT.

Nicholas. D. Kristof

(Excerpted from the 5/28/09 NYTimes Op-Ed column, "Would You Slap Your Father? If So, You're a Liberal.")

If you want to tell whether someone is conservative or liberal, what are a couple of completely nonpolitical questions that will give a good clue?

How's this: Would you be willing to slap your father in the face, with his permission, as part of a comedy skit? And, second: Does it disgust you to touch the faucet in a public restroom? Studies suggest that conservatives are more often distressed by actions that seem disrespectful of authority, such as slapping Dad. Liberals don't worry as long as Dad has given permission.

Likewise, conservatives are more likely than liberals to sense contamination or perceive disgust. People who would be disgusted to find that they had accidentally sipped from an acquaintance's drink are more likely to identify as conservatives.

The upshot is that liberals and conservatives don't just think differently, they feel differently. This may even be a result, in part, of divergent neural responses. ...

The larger point is that liberals and conservatives often form judgments through flash intuitions that aren't a result of a deliberative process. The crucial part of the brain for these judgments is the medial prefrontal cortex, which has more to do with moralizing than with rationality. If you damage your prefrontal cortex, your I.Q. may be unaffected, but you'll have trouble harrumphing.

One of the main divides between left and right is the dependence on different moral values. For liberals, morality derives mostly from fairness and prevention of harm. For conservatives, morality also involves upholding authority and loyalty – and revulsion at disgust.

Some evolutionary psychologists believe that disgust emerged as a protective mechanism against health risks, like feces, spoiled food or corpses. Later, many

societies came to apply the same emotion to social “threats.” Humans appear to be the only species that registers disgust, which is why a dog will wag its tail in puzzlement when its horrified owner yanks it back from eating excrement.

Psychologists have developed a “disgust scale” (www.disgustscale.org) based on how queasy people would be in 27 situations, such as stepping barefoot on an earthworm or smelling urine in a tunnel. Conservatives systematically register more disgust than liberals. It appears that we start with moral intuitions that our brains then find evidence to support.

To see how you weigh factors in moral decisions, take the tests at www.yourmorals.org.

GOD IS NOT BACK **David Aaronovitch**

(Excerpted from The Times (London) timesonline, 5/5/09)

Rumors of God’s return are greatly exaggerated. Religion is on the rise, religion makes you happy. It may seem bad manners for we atheists to say it, but so do pets

On a desk in my school, long ago, some past sixth-former had written four words: “God is dead—Nietzsche,” followed by four more: “Nietzsche is dead—God.” Even as a juvenile atheist I could see that the idea of the mad German getting his comeuppance from the unbelieved Almighty was funny.

And some readers today might similarly be enjoying the contents of a new book, *God is Back: How the Global Rise of Faith is Changing the World*, written by the Editor-in-Chief of *The Economist*, John Micklethwait, and his colleague Adrian Wooldridge. “You thought God had gone,” they seem to chant in the direction of the national grandstand where sits the secular elite, “you were wrong, you were wrong.”

Not surprisingly the geist that gibbers in this straitened zeit is a pessimist. Articulated by a small army of declinists, the dominant sentiment is that it’s all gone to the dogs in the West: community, spirituality, morality – and left us in a state of alienation, of anomie, eating apart in front of *American Idol*, obesely exercising on our Wiis, leading unsatisfactory lives of consumption and envy.

A couple more new books have suggested that our etiolated and weakened sense of higher self is consequently no match for rampant, self-confident Islam. We are the new late Romans and the Muslims are the new equivalent of Gibbon’s destroying religious army. “Man is a theotropic beast,” argue the authors of *God is Back*: we will have Jehovah—or Allah—one way or another.

This is an enjoyable thesis, and well argued, even if a more accurate title would be “Oh Look, God Hasn’t Gone Away as Quickly as Some Folk Expected.” In this

country, for example, the British Social Attitudes Survey showed that 74 percent of Britons belonged to a religion and attended services in 1964, but only 31 percent did so in 2005. So unless the past three years have shown a revolutionary change (and I’m not aware of any polling that shows this) God has yet to reappear. Nor am I completely convinced by the beautifully round figure of two million attendees provided by the evangelical Alpha Course (quoted by the *God is Back* combo). In 2001 it was the even rounder one million, and the course’s site is accompanied by newspaper testimonials—including one from *The Times*—that I just cannot find anywhere in the paper’s online archives.

But I mustn’t be parochial. The authors are right to suggest that, even here, religion is far more discussed now than it was 20 years ago, and that abroad there have been some really surprising developments, such as the growth of Christianity in China and Africa and of religious belief in Russia. It is also true, as they say, that previously secular regional disputes—such as that in the Middle East—have now been enGodded.

They argue that religion is a part of “the quest for community in an increasingly atomized world” and “atomized,” of course, is bad. But globalization has not atomized us – it has done the exact opposite, it has made us far more aware of each other than we have ever been.

What they mean is that we have become hypermobile compared with our forebears, and that organized religion can be a fairly instant way of gaining a community. This is the American model—modernity plus the deity—in which you up sticks, move to a new town or state and begin the process of belonging by finding yourself an attractive church or a temple. The church opens its doors and welcomes you in, doubly welcoming you for the very fact of your newness.

Whatever the reason for the faith upsurge, I don’t take quite the same pleasure in it as some do. This is partly because the religious upsurgers seem determined to confuse secularism with atheism. We atheists always have a problem with appearing bad mannered when we say what we believe. Take the *God is Back* duo’s deployment of studies purporting to show that “Christians are healthier and happier than their secular brethren,” citing a Pittsburgh doctor’s belief that going to church added three years to one’s life and a 1997 study that religiosity reduces blood pressure. To which I can riposte with all those other studies showing even better health outcomes for owning a pet. Which may appear churlish of me.

I also seem rude when I say that I can see nothing in terms of believability to distinguish the idea that Muhammad had the Koran dictated to him by Allah, from Joseph Smith’s strange education at the hands of prophet Moroni, or an animist’s belief in the spirit of the

river. So, on the whole, I don't say it.

But when Micklethwait and Wooldridge imagine Christian Africa and the Muslim world colliding on the southern edge of the Sahara, it is the secularist and not the atheist in me that is offended. It is the domination of the public realm by the private and untestable conviction that is truly repugnant, not the conviction itself. Plenty of religious secularists would agree with that.

Only this weekend a slick imam discussed the new sex education guidelines for schools. Yes, he said happily, I am looking forward to a campaign to get Muslim parents to withdraw their children from such classes.

It was the nakedness in diagrams and pictures that he objected to. And I thought, well, please don't let my daughters anywhere near his sons, not because they're Muslims, but because they might not know how to put a condom on. And save us, oh State, from children demanding to be taught "intelligent design" on the basis that it accords with their religious prejudices.

Annoyingly it may well be that religion is gaining greater traction, not because of its own strength, but because of the weakness of political parties. Politicians are desperate to reach and use pockets of activism, and—with the death of class politics—the most available and vocal belong to religious organizations.

This is slightly worrying, but I wonder whether it is religion as we understand it, Jim. Religion used to be spread by conquering others or evangelism, and maintained by static communities. Now, as with the new middle-class Chinese Christianity described in *God Is Back*, it is a mark of mobility – an individually decided preference for this Americanized religion over home-grown Confucianism or Buddhism.

It may be as much the "cool" of freedom that is being aspired to, as the love of Jesus Christ Our Savior. If so, Nietzsche may be dead, but God only survives by being available in many exciting flavors.

JESUS & MO ON FREE SPEECH AND THE DEFAMATION OF RELIGION

Mohammed: I'm all for free speech, but there must be an international law against the defamation of religion.

Jesus: By "religion" you mean Islam, don't you?

Mo: Well, yes – because it is Islam which is frequently and wrongly associated with human rights violations and terrorism.

Jesus: I know – by human rights violators and terrorists.

Mo: That's exactly what I mean, Jesus. It has to stop.

Jesus: You want to stop human rights violators and terrorists acting in the name of Islam?

Mo: No, I want to stop people pointing it out.

Jesus: But it's true.

Mo: Shut up!

"STUPEFIED!" THE BUSH-YEARS RELIGIOUS CRAZINESS WAS TRUE – ALL OF IT

Clive Anderson, CounterPunch

(Excerpted from "Bush's Shocking Biblical Prophecy Emerges: God Wants to 'Erase' Mid-East Enemies 'Before a New Age Begins' on altnet.org, 5/25/09)

The revelation this month in *GQ Magazine* that Donald Rumsfeld as Defense Secretary embellished top-secret wartime memos with quotations from the Bible prompts a question. Why did he believe he could influence President Bush by that means?

The answer may lie in an alarming story about George Bush's Christian millenarian beliefs that has yet to come to light.

In 2003 while lobbying leaders to put together the Coalition of the Willing, President Bush spoke to



Gog and OhMyGog

France's President Jacques Chirac. Bush wove a story about how the Biblical creatures Gog and Magog were at work in the Middle East and how they must be defeated.

In Genesis and Ezekiel Gog and Magog are forces of the Apocalypse who are prophesied to come out of the north and destroy Israel unless stopped. The Book of Revelation took up the Old Testament prophesy:

"And when the thousand years are Expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, And shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them."

Bush believed the time had now come for that battle, telling Chirac:

"This confrontation is willed by God, who wants to use this conflict to erase his people's enemies before a New Age begins."

The story of the conversation emerged only because the Élysée Palace, baffled by Bush's words, sought advice from Thomas Romer, a professor of theology at the University of Lausanne. Four years later, Romer gave an account in the September 2007 issue of the university's review, *Allez savoir*. The article apparently went unnoticed, although it was referred to in a French newspaper.

The story has now been confirmed by Chirac himself in a new book, published in France in March, by journalist Jean Claude Maurice. Chirac is said to have been "stupefied" and disturbed by Bush's invocation of Biblical prophesy to justify the war in Iraq and "wondered how someone could be so superficial and fanatical in their beliefs."

Yeah, us too.

WHAT IF WE WERE ALL VEGETARIANS, JUST FOR A DAY?

Kathy Freston

(Excerpted from "The Startling Effects of Going Vegetarian for Just One Day" on www.huffingtonpost.com, 4/2/09)

Editor's Note: Ms. Freston doesn't say specifically, but I believe the context of her article implies all of us eating vegetarian one day a week, not just one day.

Sometimes, solutions to the world's biggest problems are right in front of us. The following statistics are eye-opening, to say the least. If everyone went vegetarian just for one day, the U.S. would save:

100 billion gallons of water, enough to supply all the homes in New England for almost 4 months;

1.5 billion pounds of crops otherwise fed to livestock, enough to feed the state of New Mexico for more than a year;

70 million gallons of gas – enough to fuel all the cars of Canada and Mexico combined with plenty to spare;

3 million acres of land, an area more than twice the size of Delaware;

33 tons of antibiotics.

If everyone went vegetarian just for one day, the U.S. would prevent:

Greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to 1.2 million tons of CO₂, as much as produced by all of France;

3 million tons of soil erosion and \$70 million in resulting economic damages;

4.5 million tons of animal excrement;

Almost 7 tons of ammonia emissions, a major air pollutant.

My favorite statistic is this: According to Environmental Defense, if every American skipped one meal of chicken per week and substituted vegetarian foods instead, the carbon dioxide savings would be the same as taking more than half a million cars off of U.S. roads. See how easy it is to make an impact? ...

A recent United Nations report titled *Livestock's Long Shadow* concluded that the meat industry causes almost 40 percent more greenhouse gas emissions than all the world's transportation systems – that's all the cars, trucks, SUVs, planes and ships in the world combined. The report also concluded that factory farming is one of the biggest contributors to the most serious environmental problems at every level – local and global.

HE PLAYED GOD, BUT WHAT HE REALLY WANTS TO DO IS DIRECT

They took me from my family and stuck me in a medieval situation," says Osel Hita Torres, 24, who as a toddler was enthroned by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of Lama Yeshe. He has left his order and is studying film in Madrid. — *Harper's Weekly*, 6/2/09

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO? TORTURE!

Do you think the use of torture against suspected terrorists in order to gain important information can often be justified, sometimes be justified, rarely be justified, or never be justified?

That's the question the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life asked 742 Americans in April.

54 percent of all respondents who say they go to church services at least weekly say it's often or sometimes okay. People unaffiliated with any religion were least likely to back torture. Only four in 10 of them said it was ever permissible, and 20 percent said never.

And the group most likely to okay waterboarding and other "enhanced interrogation" techniques?

Evangelical Protestants; you know, the What Would Jesus Do? crowd.

WHAT ELSE WOULD JESUS DO? KILL!

The U.S. Supreme Court has declined to hear a case that would determine whether jurors may read aloud from the Bible during deliberations.

A death-row inmate in Texas (of course, where else?), Jimmie Urbano Lucero asked for a new sentencing hearing, complaining that his Sixth Amendment fair-trial rights were violated during jury deliberations at his murder trial.

It seems that after convicting him, two of the twelve jurors opposed the death sentence and voted for life in prison. The jury foreman then read from scripture, and the panel voted the necessary 12-0 for the death penalty.

The Supremes offered no explanation for denying to hear the appeal and let stand decisions by the Texas courts affirming Lucero's death sentence.

Comment: Score one more for Jesus. And thanks to the June 2009 Humanist Monthly newsletter of the Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society for the above two items.

PRECONCEPTUAL SCIENCE — YOU KNOW, LIKE "CREATION SCIENCE"— EXPLAINED

Wiley Miller

(From the comic strip "Non-Sequitur," June 1, 2009)

(6-year old Danae has a philosophically-fraught conversation with Lucy, her stuffed-horse doll)

Lucy: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Danae: A preconceptual scientist.

Lucy: Uh ... what's that?

Danae: It's the new science of reaching a conclusion before doing research, then simply dismissing anything contrary to your preconceived notions.

Lucy: That's got to be the dumb ...

Danae: Dismissed.

**SECULARISM vs. DEMOCRACY.
SOME ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION:
WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?**

The question raised in June PIQUE concerns the conundrum caused by the Orthodox Jews of the village of Monsey—a minority population who do not send their children to the public schools in the East Ramapo (NY) school district and who resent the high taxes they have to pay for said schools—winning fair and open elections to garner a majority position on that district’s board, then instituting cost cuts, including the closing of a school.

In short: Do secular values, like free public education, trump majority rule? Or should the democratic electoral process, under law, be inviolate? — JR

Art Harris

Dear John:

You have found a wonderful example of Tevye’s asking of a question that would cross a rabbi’s eyes.

In a constitutional democracy the majority rules but the minority can’t be trampled upon. The Hasidim vote as a bloc and woe to any dissenter who doesn’t. That cohesion gives them an important lever to override a less organized opposition. While I favor the group fighting the Hasidim, if they can’t get enough of their numbers to show up and block the bloc voters, they are screwed.

However, there may be recourse in the courts, including a redivision of the county, allowing the Hasidim (who might enact “Black Laws” in keeping with their dress color coding) to control their enclave.

Democracy isn’t perfect; this is one of the examples.

Barbara Lifton

The Constitution of the United States protects minority groups of all kinds (as well as individuals) against oppressive or discriminatory treatment by even a democratically elected majority. (See, First, Fourth, Fifth, Seventh, Eleventh and Fourteenth Amendments.)

Majority rule and protection of the rights of individuals and minorities are not contradictory ideas. Majority rule is a means of organizing government and deciding public issues; of course it should not be used as a means of oppressing other citizens for any purpose, even if the legislature believes it to be just (remember segregation).

Religious freedom is a constitutional right. However, there does not seem to be any evidence that the East Ramapo School Board majority is deliberately forcing its religious beliefs on the rest of the district population.

No legislature acting collusively may legally legislate to benefit its individual members financially. Such acts may be criminal and should be reported to the

Attorney General. There are no allegations that I have heard about of criminal behavior by the Board. If the acts of the legislative body are legal and have an arguably legitimate government purpose, then due process has not been violated, and individual voters do not have a right to challenge these acts solely on the basis that it prejudices them financially or otherwise. If the acts of the Board do not violate the majority’s constitutional rights, the citizenry has no standing to claim a Constitutional violation. There does not seem to be an attempt by the majority of the Board to deny the citizens of the district “free public education.” Why should they? They have chosen to send their children to private, expensive religious schools – if they do not want to pay taxes for public schools, and decide to starve all of them financially, they would have made the budget so small that none of the schools could continue to exist.

With great respect and affection for John [Rafferty], the title of his article is inaccurate. There are no facts that I can see which support his claim that it is primarily “secularists” like us who are suffering financially and educationally from the actions of the Board.* It seems that voters who belong to other religious groups don’t like the Board’s decisions either.

As the author of an article at America.gov said: “...only through the democratic process of tolerance, debate and willingness to compromise can free societies reach agreements that embrace the twin pillars of majority rule and minority rights.” Despite the comments of the organizer of an opposition slate that it is unjust for a majority citizenry different ethnically than the majority Board members to be “run” by a religious minority, it is government with the consent of the governed. Unless a constitutional violation by the Board can be found, then the “consent of the governed” has spoken: a majority of voters elected this Board for its current term.

A majority of the citizens of Alabama voted for a state government that supported segregation in all areas of public life. They believed their rights were overturned by the Supreme Court, which held that they failed constitutionally to protect a racial minority. In this [East Ramapo] case, there were no laws passed by the Board which deny the rights of the citizens to send their children to public schools.

As I said, if the Board had closed all public schools, that would have been another question. Then there could have been an issue raised as to whether the Board was imposing its religious education beliefs on the voters by “changing” the curriculum (as in Dover, PA), in violation of the Constitution, (as well as state law, no doubt).

In 2008, the voters of the United States finally got tired of a Republican-dominated Congress that did all it could to force its agenda on the rest of the country. What

did we do about it? We organized and threw the bums out. The people of East Ramapo democratically elected the School Board. The majority of members dominating the Board are from only one religious group because the voters elected them; they knew these candidates all sent their children to private schools. Why the heck did they vote them in if they thought such members would not support public education?

What if the majority of the Board were Catholic? Would this fact have any relevance to its ability to protect the public school system? If these Catholic members believed that cuts must be made in the education budget for fiscal reasons, would the voters have accused them of prejudice against public school education? I wonder.

If the voters disagree with the Board's policies, or believe the Board is prejudiced against public education, then defeat them at the next election.

*With great respect and affection for Barbara, I made no such claim. — JR

Dennis Middlebrooks

The situation in the East Ramapo school district is the direct result of the lunacy behind "local control" of our education system. Every advanced democracy aside from the U.S.A. has a national public school system administered and controlled by qualified civil servants. These nations do not permit insular religious groups with anti-secular agendas to hold sway over the public schools in any given district.

In America, however, the mantra of "community control" opens the floodgates for the worst elements in our society to dominate local school boards, and we have seen the results nationwide over the years. Open opposition to integration, hostility to modern science (e.g., evolution and the Big Bang), support for the teaching of biblical myths in the science classes, and in the case of East Ramapo, control over the public education of children from various backgrounds by a bloc-voting group of religious fanatics who regard these children and their teachers with contempt. These are the same people who, in Brooklyn a few years back, refused to send their own children to public schools for inoculations on the grounds that any contact with non-Hasidic children would result in "contamination." Yet they pay taxes and have the right to vote.

Slaying the sacred cow of local control is the only solution, but it will not happen.

Jeff Kaufman

Thanks for your thought-provoking article in June PIQUE. It points to the inherent tension that exists in our system of government. We pride ourselves on our democracy and its principles and at the same time have

developed different mechanisms for determining how decisions are made. Thus, our Constitution, which contains guidelines and principles set above the will of a majority, requires super-majority and extraordinary means to change it; less principled policy needs simpler majorities for implementation.

In the school district example you cite voting blocs along religious lines have developed to implement policy consistent with their religious ideals, a sort of religious gerrymandering; they are a natural outgrowth of regional politics. When these blocs violate basic constitutional principles they must be stopped.

In New York City we face similar issues, but from a much different perspective. Our school board, through the financial power of the mayor, has been effectively abolished. Parents and teachers have been marginalized and the mayor and chancellor have instituted a "corporate model" of education that many believe is antithetical to democratic education. Since the mayor can outspend any rival he can easily implement these changes and get the votes to be reelected.

Is religious bloc voting any different than billionaire bloc voting? I don't know if our constitution can save us.

Robert Dickhoff

Plato said that democracy was the worst form of government. I don't agree, but it has its flaws. Perhaps the flaws can be eliminated, perhaps not. Hopefully political science will eventually solve the problem.

Edd Doerr, President, Americans for Religious Liberty

The Page One story in June PIQUE really got under my skin. How dare any community in the U.S. abolish public education, even by "majority rule"? Is anything being done about this? Several years ago the Kiryas Joel Orthodox community near New York City got the legislature to create a separate school district just for them. The case went to the New York and U.S. highest courts three times before the nonsense was stopped. Of course, if all public schools were equitably state-funded this sort of thing could not happen.

Sim Storch

Dear Brother Rafferty: Don't forget about those of us who don't have children and are forced to pay school taxes; how democratic is that? The Jews in Monsey don't want to pay twice; I don't think I should pay once.

John Rafferty

While in general agreement with all of the above correspondents except Sim Storch (should you not be taxed for the local hook-and-ladder if you haven't had a fire?), and share Edd Doerr's outrage over Kiryas Joel

(that enclave of fundamentalist pig-ignorance wanted their own school district so they could reap extra “special needs” state money, which they needed because of the number of their children with birth defects, the result of their own medieval inbreeding practices), I most heartily concur with the arguments of attorney Barbara Lifton (scholarly) and curmudgeon Art Harris (terse) — You lost at the ballot box; suck it up and go to work.

School board elections in America routinely draw turnouts of fewer than 10 percent of all registered voters, themselves often only half of all eligible adults. Which means that just 3 or 4 percent of adults in a district, often single-issue bloc voters—creationists, no-taxers, conspiracy theorists—can take over and dictate policy. Until everyone else wakes up and goes to work.

Bloc voting is as American as apple pie (or in Monsey, apple strudel). In pre-Prohibition days city political machines gathered voters at saloons with free beer, then marched them to the polling places. Today, labor unions organize their members right into the voting booths; corporations and industry associations “bundle” campaign contributions for extra clout; lowly neighborhood associations pick up and drive the elderly and infirm, and walk them right into the voting booths.

And that’s what the majority citizens of the East Ramapo School District have to do. I abhor the troglodytes of the Monsey bloc who would legislate secular public education right out of existence if they could, but they won their elections fair and square. So must the majority citizens. If they can’t bestir themselves to the polls once every November, if staying home to vote on American Idol is more important than attending a school board or PTA meeting on a frigid February evening, if they’re just “too busy” to get involved, then they have no legitimate complaint when their kids sit 40 in a classroom or have to spend an hour on the bus because their local school has been closed.

Get to work.

Class dismissed.

COSMIC PROPORTIONS AND THE EMPTINESS OF SPACE

Natalie Angier

(From Ms. Angier’s The Canon, excerpted on delancey-place.com 5/29/09)

To gain a richer sense of cosmic proportions, we can paraphrase William Blake, and see the Earth as a fine grain of sand. The sun, then, would be an orange-sized object twenty feet away, while Jupiter, the biggest planet of the solar system, would be a pebble eighty-four feet in the other direction—almost the length of a basketball court—and the outermost orbs of the solar system, Neptune and Pluto, would be larger and smaller

grains, respectively, found at a distance of two and a quarter blocks from Granule Earth.

Beyond that, the gaps between scenic vistas become absurd, and it’s best to settle in for a nice, comfy coma. Assuming our little orrery of a solar system is tucked into a quiet neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, you won’t reach the next stars—the Alpha Centauri triple star system—until somewhere just west of Omaha, or the star after that until the foothills of the Rockies. And in between astronomical objects is lots and lots of space, silky, sullen, inky-dinky space, plenty of nothing, nulls within voids. Just as the dominion of the very small, the interior of the atom, is composed almost entirely of empty space, so, too, is the kingdom of the heavens. Nature, it seems, adores a vacuum.

“The universe is a pretty empty place, and that’s something most people don’t get” said Michael Brown of Caltech. “You go watch Star Wars, and you see the heroes flying through an asteroid belt, and they’re twisting and turning nonstop to avoid colliding with asteroids.” In reality, he said, when the Galileo spacecraft flew through our solar system’s asteroid belt in the early 1990s, NASA spent millions of dollars in a manic effort to steer the ship close enough to one of the rubble rocks to take photos and maybe sample a bit of its dust. “And when they got lucky and the spacecraft actually passed by two asteroids, it was considered truly amazing,” said Brown. “For most of Galileo’s journey, there was nothing. Nothing to see, nothing to take pretty pictures of. And we’re talking about the solar system, which is a fairly dense region of the universe.”

Don’t be fooled by the gorgeous pictures of dazzling pinwheel galaxies with sunnyside bulges in their mid-sections, either. They, too, are mostly ghostly: the average separation between stars is about 100,000 times greater than the distance between us and the Sun.

Yes, our Milky Way has about 300 billion stars to its credit, but those stars are dispersed across a chasmal piece of property 100,000 light-years in diameter. That’s roughly 6 trillion miles (the distance light travels in a year) multiplied by 100,000 ... miles wide. Even using the shrunken scale of a citrus sun lying just twenty feet away from our sand-grain Earth, crossing the galaxy would require a trip of more than 24 million miles.

CARL SAGAN ON THOSE SAME COSMIC PROPORTIONS

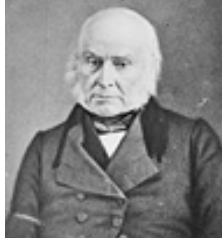
For all our conceits about being the center of the universe, we live in a routine planet of a humdrum star stuck away in an obscure corner ... on an unexceptional galaxy, which is one of about 100 billion galaxies.

That is the fundamental fact of the universe we inhabit, and it is very good for us to understand that.

**JOHN QUINCY ADAMS
BORN JULY 11, 1767**

Why is one of our least-known presidents the man who at the age of 12 did secretarial duty for his ambassador-father in France; was a Massachusetts State Senator by age 35, in 1802; a U.S. Senator in 1803; minister to Russia in Madison's administration (he brokered the peace with England in 1814); was appointed minister to England, then Secretary of State by Monroe (Adams actually wrote the Monroe Doctrine); won the presidency in 1824 in a brokered deal; as President promoted a highway system, the financing of science and the founding of an observatory; shrugged off his 1828 re-election loss and won a Congressional seat in 1830, where he served until his death in 1848, fighting for years (eventually winning) against Southern-imposed gag rules on anti-slavery petitions, and no less tirelessly (but less successfully) against the theft of Indian lands.

Even more famously in 1841, as Joan Slomanson reminds us, Adams, known by then as "Old Man Eloquence," represented the defendants in U.S. v. The Amistad Africans before the Supreme Court, successfully arguing that the African rebels who dared to overpower their slave-ship masters and seize the ship were being



The Sixth President of the United States

transported illegally as slaves and should be set free. Adams won, and never billed for his services.

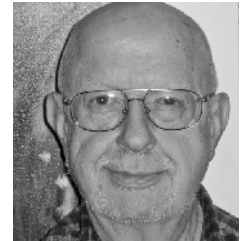
"When I observe into what inconsistent absurdities those persons run who make speculative, metaphysical religion a matter of importance, I am fully determined never to puzzle myself in the mazes of religious discussion, to content myself with practicing the dictates of God and reason so far as I can judge for myself"

"There is in the clergy of all Christian denominations a time-serving, cringing, subservient morality, as wide from the spirit of the gospel as it is from the intrepid assertion and vindication of truth."

— John Quincy Adams

SAM MILLIGAN RETIRES FROM THE BOARD

Citing an increasing workload that makes regular attendance at Board and other meetings difficult (nationally-recognized harp authority Sam is preparing two books on music for publication), Samuel Milligan has, with regrets, stepped down from the Board of SHSNY.



Good Sam

At the June 16 SHSNY Board meeting, Donna Marxer immediately nominated Sam to the new SHSNY Advisory Board; the Board of Directors unanimously approved, and Sam graciously accepted.

NO PIQUE IN AUGUST
The editor, all our local and national staff, and all our correspondents in all our bureaus worldwide will be on vacation.

The mess in Amherst
Page 1
Test your political morality
Page 3
Veggie for a day?
Page 6

Secular Humanist Society of New York
F.D.R. Station,
P.O. Box 7661
New York, NY 10150-1913

ANSHS

