

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

June, 2009

This month we celebrate 40 million (maybe) nonbelievers, shout atheism (or at least freethought) from the rooftops, parse reason and faith, start our last-minute Christmas shopping, steer secularists out of Yankee Stadium, review a best-selling book (5 million copies in print?) you've never heard of, suggest a Times columnist return to reality and consider invading Holland. But first, we pose some questions that Art Harris says "would cross a rabbi's eyes"—but that we'd like you to answer.—*JR*

SECULARISM vs. DEMOCRACY: WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

John Rafferty

Consider—as Peter Applebome has in his April 26 “Our Towns” column in *The New York Times*—the East Ramapo school district in our northern suburb of Rockland County, where most of the population is a riotous ethnic mix of whites and blacks, of Asians and all the varieties of Latino/Hispanic – except for the town of Monsey, an enclave of observant Orthodox Jews.

Like many school districts, East Ramapo faces serious budget shortfalls and the need to cut services and/or increase already sky-high tax rates that are greatly resented by the Jews of Monsey, who don't send their kids to the public schools. So they have organized, fielded candidates for whom they vote *en bloc*, and for a few years now, representatives of the small Monsey minority have been the duly-elected majority on the East Ramapo school board. And not only have they made unpopular budget cuts, this year they closed a school.

Oh-oh.

Many citizens, Applebome writes, “are chafing at the idea that people who don't send their children to the public schools are making the decisions for those from very different cultures who do.” One, who is organizing a slate of candidates for the next election, asks “where the justice is in a public school district that's overwhelmingly Haitian, African-American and Hispanic being run by what is euphemized as 'the private school community,'” adding, “The current system doesn't address the question of governance with the consent of the governed. It doesn't feel like America.”

Of course the school board majority doesn't see it that way. They not only defend their fiscal prudence, but have some resentments themselves. President Nathan Rothschild says the board is committed to quality education, and that America is still a democracy, where whoever gets the most votes gets to serve.

“I take great offense,” he says, “to the idea that you can tell a specific part of the community, ‘You're not entitled to run for office.’ That's outrageous.”

Now, your opinion, PIQUE readers, please.

Consider these questions.

In our secular society, should any religious group be allowed to dictate public policy? *But ...* in a democracy and under the law, shouldn't an electoral majority rule?

Is “majority rule” really fair when a bloc-voting minority is able to impose its will on the actual majority? *But ...* isn’t a group willing to organize, work and vote for its goals entitled to its lawful electoral victory?

Why should people with no interest in a vital service (public schools), who might even benefit from the service’s cessation, be allowed to dictate policy? *But ...* shouldn’t all the people who pay taxes for services, whether they use them or not, have equal say as to how much they are taxed and how their tax dollars are spent?

Do secular values (free public education) trump majority rule? *Or ...* should the free democratic process, under law, be inviolate?

What, did you think this was going to be easy?

We want *your* opinion. Send your ideas, remarks and/or thoughtful short essays to editor@shsny.org, please.

RECLAIMING AMERICA’S SOUL

Paul Krugman

(Reprinted from the Op-Ed page of The NYTimes, 4/24/09)

“Nothing will be gained by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past.”

So declared President Obama, after his commendable decision to release the legal memos that his predecessor used to justify torture. Some people in the political and media establishments have echoed his position. We need to look forward, not backward, they say. No prosecutions, please; no investigations; we’re just too busy.

And there are indeed immense challenges out there: an economic crisis, a health care crisis, an environmental crisis. Isn’t revisiting the abuses of the last eight years, no matter how bad they were, a luxury we can’t afford?

No, it isn’t, because America is more than a collection of policies. We are, or at least we used to be, a nation of moral ideals. In the past, our government has sometimes done an imperfect job of upholding those ideals. But never before have our leaders so utterly betrayed everything our nation stands for. “This government does not torture people,” declared former President Bush, but it did, and all the world knows it.

And the only way we can regain our moral compass, not just for the sake of our position in the world, but for the sake of our own national conscience, is to investigate how that happened, and, if necessary, to prosecute those responsible.

What about the argument that investigating the Bush administration’s abuses will impede efforts to deal with the crises of today? Even if that were true—even if truth and justice came at a high price—that would arguably be a price we must pay: laws aren’t supposed to be enforced only when convenient. But is there any real reason to believe that the nation would pay a high price for accountability?

For example, would investigating the crimes of the Bush era really divert time and energy needed elsewhere? Let’s be concrete: whose time and energy are we talking about? Tim Geithner, the Treasury secretary, wouldn’t be called away from his efforts to rescue the economy. Peter Orszag, the budget director, wouldn’t be called away from his efforts to reform health care. Steven Chu, the energy secretary, wouldn’t be called away from his efforts to limit climate change. Even the president needn’t, and indeed shouldn’t, be involved. All he would have to do is let the Justice Department do its job—which he’s supposed to do in any case—and not get in the way of any Congressional investigations.

I don't know about you, but I think America is capable of uncovering the truth and enforcing the law even while it goes about its other business.

Still, you might argue—and many do—that revisiting the abuses of the Bush years would undermine the political consensus the president needs to pursue his agenda. But the answer to that is, what political consensus? There are still, alas, a significant number of people in our political life who stand on the side of the torturers. But these are the same people who have been relentless in their efforts to block President Obama's attempt to deal with our economic crisis and will be equally relentless in their opposition when he endeavors to deal with health care and climate change. The president cannot lose their good will, because they never offered any.

That said, there are a lot of people in Washington who weren't allied with the torturers but would nonetheless rather not revisit what happened in the Bush years. Some of them probably just don't want an ugly scene; my guess is that the president, who clearly prefers visions of uplift to confrontation, is in that group. But the ugliness is already there, and pretending it isn't won't make it go away.

Others, I suspect, would rather not revisit those years because they don't want to be reminded of their own sins of omission. For the fact is that officials in the Bush administration instituted torture as a policy, misled the nation into a war ... and, probably, tortured people in the attempt to extract "confessions" that would justify that war. And during the march to war, most of the political and media establishment looked the other way.

It's hard, then, not to be cynical when some of the people who should have spoken out against what was happening, but didn't, now declare that we should forget the whole era – for the sake of the country, of course.

Sorry, but what we really should do for the sake of the country is have investigations both of torture and of the march to war. These investigations should, where appropriate, be followed by prosecutions – not out of vindictiveness, but because this is a nation of laws.

We need to do this for the sake of our future. For this isn't about looking backward, it's about looking forward – because it's about reclaiming America's soul.

**JESSE VENTURA (NO SQUISHY LIBERAL)
ON WATERBOARDING**

On May 18, former Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura, who was waterboarded as part of his Navy Seal training, asked on TV's "The View": "If waterboarding is OK, why don't we let our police do it to suspects so they can learn what they know? If waterboarding is OK, why didn't we waterboard McVeigh and Nichols, the Oklahoma City bombers, to find out if there were more people involved? We only seem to waterboard Muslims. Have we waterboarded anyone else? Name me someone else who has been waterboarded."

**2001: AFGHANISTAN
2003: IRAQ
2010: HOLLAND**

(Excerpted from "Time to Dump That Bush-Era Law permitting an Invasion of Holland to 'Rescue' U.S. Soldiers," by Robert Marquand, Christian Science Monitor, 2/16/09)

In 2002, Congress passed a law enabling United States forces to unilaterally storm into peaceful Holland to liberate American soldiers held for war crimes.

Coming in the early days of the war on terrorists, and as the International Criminal Court (ICC) was being formed [in The Hague], the measure ... seemed to the Dutch—stout US allies—an absurd example of America’s “with us or against us” foreign policy.

Formally titled the American Service Members Protection Act, the measure is widely and derisively known in Holland as the Invasion of The Hague Act.

Odd as it may seem, the law allows the US to constitutionally send jack-booted commandos to fly over fields of innocent tulips, swoop into the land of wooden shoes, tread past threatening windmills and sleepy milk cows into the Dutch capital—into a city synonymous with international law—and pry loose any US troops.

The US did not sign the ICC-enabling Rome treaty in 1998. President Clinton did sign at the end of his term, but President Bush repealed it. The Hague invasion act, passed under Sen. Jesse Helm’s Foreign Relations Committee, calls for “all means necessary and appropriate to bring about the release of any US or allied personnel being detained or imprisoned by ... the International Criminal Court.” ...

“The Dutch were a little bit offended. We consider ourselves the legal capital of the world, and your major ally not only threatens you, but tries to blackmail you,” says Max van Weezel, a political columnist and author. “If the Obama administration can reverse this law, we Dutch would think the Americans are becoming a little bit normal again. But I don’t know if he can.”

Today, the Dutch mostly treat the issue as a joke, a cowboy American moment. But it is widely felt that if President Barack Obama’s foreign policy team wants to achieve a symbolic break with the previous White House, it could rescind the invasion law. As a Dutch official put it, “I wouldn’t overstate how seriously we take this any more, but it does seem a bizarre symbol.”

In 2002, Dutch diplomat Harold DeWitt wrote to colleagues: “We are quite alarmed to hear about the impending invasion of the Netherlands. Our military is on high alert. We would really value you forwarding any news and relevant information as soon as it comes to your attention. I would like to be able to notify my superiors prior to any invasion.”

Comment: *This insane “law” is still on the books. — JR*

40 MILLION NONBELIEVERS

Ronald Aronson

(Excerpted from “40 Million Nonbelievers in America? The Secret Is Almost Out,” posted on alternet.com, 2/5/09)

A recent *Newsweek* cover—in a bid to (finally) match the celebrated 1966 “Is God Dead?” cover of *Time*—read, in the shape of a cross: “The Decline and Fall of Christian America.” Editor Jon Meacham’s story highlights *Newsweek*’s latest poll results showing that 10 percent fewer Americans identify as Christian today than twenty years ago. But more importantly, and mentioned only in passing, is the growth among atheists and secularists of all stripes.

According to the latest American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) of more than 54,000 adults, between 2001 and 2008 the number willing to identify themselves as atheist and agnostic has gone from under 2 million to 3.6 million. Small numbers

compared to the whole, but it's a rise of 85 percent of those willing to describe themselves as living without God during the years of our most overtly religious presidency.

Even more newsworthy, when the widely-scorned labels "atheist" and "agnostic" are replaced with specifics about beliefs ("There is no such thing" as God, "There is no way to know," or "I'm not sure," and added to those who refused to answer) it turns out that over eighteen percent of Americans do not profess belief in a God or a higher power.

According to ARIS, then, there could be as many as 40 million adult nonbelievers in the United States.

Consider: If these numbers are correct, nonbelievers amount to more than the highest estimates of African Americans or gays. Secularists are one of America's largest minorities. It is no longer possible to proclaim, as the Gallup Poll announced fifty years ago: "Nearly all Americans believe in God." That is today's most significant change.

So what explains the impressive increase among those willing to identify as atheist or agnostic? For those who think that books and ideas simply don't matter, it is dramatic tribute to the success of the "new atheist" writers, including Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. To paraphrase the title of Dennett's book, their goal has been to "break the spell" of religion—and they have evidently helped more Americans "achieve" that goal.

If a new confidence is in the offing it is also visible in the American Humanist Association's scandalous Christmastime bus ads in Washington DC ("Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness' sake."). No less striking is the "Out" campaign ("Come Out," "Reach Out," "Speak Out," "Keep Out," "Stand Out,") especially among students and young people.

One of the few writers who has paid attention to these phenomena, Konstantin Petrenko, writing for Religion Dispatches, does so in order to dismiss them. He stresses the discrepancy between those embracing the "atheist" or "agnostic" label and those who describe themselves as not believing in God. "It appears that most of the unaffiliated individuals are not atheistic or anti-religious in any activist sense, but are rather apathetic toward organized religion and reluctant to join any particular denomination or sect."

True enough, but the same can be said of most religious believers. This is no reason to downplay the fact that so many have clearly fallen away from religion—that is, they live their lives without any sort of God. Nor can we ignore ARIS's statement that the six percent of Americans who refuse to answer the question about their beliefs "tend to somewhat resemble 'Nones' in their social profile and beliefs." Which means, according to ARIS's most striking conclusion: "The U.S. population continues to show signs of becoming less religious, with one in five Americans failing to indicate a religious identity in 2008."

Furthermore, among those who do, over 12 percent of the total sample describe their belief in ways that ARIS concludes are "deistic" (a higher power but no personal God). One in eight American believers are as religious as ... *Tom Paine*. Those who continue to believe in a traditional Jewish, Christian, or Muslim personal god have dropped to under 70 percent of the American population. Despite all efforts to ignore or minimize this, it is big news.

And the discrepancy between those willing to be public and open about their religious disbelief and those who are not is also big news. Among nonbelievers, judging

from my discussions with hundreds of them over the past several months, many are not “new atheists” (militantly doing battle with religion) but are, in Peter Steinfels’ terminology, “new new atheists.” These people are not primarily concerned with arguing against the belief in God, but are trying to find ways of coexisting in a society in which both nonbelievers and believers can expect to be around for a long time to come. They shy away from labels as they seek their own bearings and their own comfort zone in today’s America.

Secularists welcomed President Obama’s shout-out to nonbelievers during his inaugural address, but are painfully aware that when launching his campaign he criticized them for trying to keep religion out of the public square, but not the religious right for its attempts to erase the line between church and state.

They worry, along with Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, that Obama’s renewal of the Bush Faith-Based Initiative in the new Office of Faith-Based and Community Partnerships has not ruled out proselytizing and discriminatory hiring for religious social service programs that are granted federal dollars. And they wince when recalling that he subjected himself to the religious test of being drilled like a catechism pupil by Rick Warren on his own particular way of believing in Jesus Christ (the same Rick Warren who announced that he would never vote for an atheist for president).

Above all, rather than combating religious belief at every turn, many nonbelievers would cheer if the President initiated a genuinely multicultural approach to both believers and secularists in today’s America. This might entail, as was not done at the Democratic National Convention last August, inviting secularists as well as believers to platforms that normally exclude the irreligious (i.e., the “values and unity” event preceding the Convention that was exclusively for religious believers). It might entail as much political attention being paid to nonbelievers as believers at public events—transforming moments of prayer into moments of silence. In other words, it would mean abandoning the implicit assumption of so much of American public and private life that religious values, norms and practices apply to everyone—and show respect to American’s enormous nonreligious minority.

JESUS AND MO DEPLORE NEW-ATHEIST NAME-CALLING

(From jesusandmo.net, May 20, 2009)

Jesus: I’m so tired of all those new atheists attacking us people of faith.

Mohammed: Me too.

Jesus: They’re not interested in engaging seriously with thoughtful believers. All they do is engage in angry name-calling and whine about being persecuted.

Mo: Yeah, why can’t the bloody bastards leave us alone?

THE BARMAID EXPLAINS MODERN MOCKERY FOR JESUS AND MO

(From jesusandmo.net, May 1, 2009)

Jesus: Mockery is nothing new. In the early days of Christianity they ridiculed us, but they only strengthened our faith.

Barmaid: Maybe they weren’t doing it properly?

Mohammed: It is worse today – books, adverts, computer games, comics ...

Jesus: ... atheists show a complete and utter lack of respect for our dearly held religious beliefs.

Barmaid: There is a reason for that.

Mo: What, barmaid? What is the reason?

Barmaid: A complete and utter lack of respect for your dearly held religious beliefs.

Mo: That would explain it.

MORE ATHEISTS SHOUT IT FROM THE ROOFTOPS

Laurie Goodstein

(Excerpted from The New York Times, April 27, 2009)

Two months after the local atheist organization in Charleston, South Carolina, put up a billboard saying “Don’t Believe in God? You Are Not Alone,” the group’s 13 board members met in Laura and Alex Kasman’s living room to grapple with the fallout.

The problem was not that the group, the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, had attracted an outpouring of hostility. It was the opposite. An overflow audience of more than 100 had showed up for their most recent public symposium, and the board members discussed whether it was time to find a larger place.

And now parents were coming out of the woodwork asking for family-oriented programs where they could meet like-minded nonbelievers. “Is everyone in favor of sponsoring a picnic for humanists with families?” asked the board president, Jonathan Lamb, a 27-year-old meteorologist, eliciting a chorus of “ayes.”

More than ever, America’s atheists are linking up and speaking out – even here in South Carolina, home to Bob Jones University, blue laws and a legislature that last year unanimously approved a Christian license plate embossed with a cross and the words “I Believe” (a move blocked by a judge and now headed for trial).

They are connecting on the Internet, holding meet-ups in bars, advertising on billboards and buses, volunteering at food pantries and picking up roadside trash, earning atheist groups recognition on adopt-a-highway signs. They liken their strategy to that of the gay-rights movement, which lifted off when closeted members of a scorned minority decided to go public.

“It’s not about carrying banners or protesting,” said Herb Silverman, a math professor at the College of Charleston who founded the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, which has about 150 members on the coast of the Carolinas. “The most important thing is coming out of the closet.” ...

Local and national atheist organizations have flourished in recent years, fed by outrage over the Bush administration’s embrace of the religious right. A spate of best-selling books on atheism also popularized the notion that nonbelief is not just an argument but a cause, like environmentalism or muscular dystrophy.

Ten national organizations that variously identify themselves as atheists, humanists, freethinkers and others who go without God have recently united to form the Secular Coalition for America, of which Mr. Silverman is president. These groups, once rivals, are now pooling resources to lobby in Washington for separation of church and state. ...

Despite changing attitudes, polls continue to show that atheists are ranked lower than any other minority or religious group when Americans are asked whether they would vote for or approve of their child marrying a member of that group.

Over lunch with some new atheist joiners at a downtown Charleston restaurant, one young mother said that her husband was afraid to allow her to go public as an atheist because employers would refuse to hire him. Another member said that when she first moved to Charleston from Toronto in 2001, “the first question people asked me was, What church do you belong to?”... She found the secular humanists through a newspaper ad and attended a meeting. Now, she is ready to go public, especially after doing some genealogical research recently. “I had ancestors who fought in the American Revolution so I could speak my mind,” she said.

Until recent years, the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry were local pariahs. Mr. Silverman—whose specialty license plate, one of many offered by the state, says “In Reason We Trust”—was invited to give the invocation at the Charleston City Council once, but half the council members walked out. The local chapter of Habitat for Humanity would not let the Secular Humanists volunteer to build houses wearing T-shirts that said “Non Prophet Organization,” he said.

When their billboard went up in January, with their Web site address displayed prominently, they expected hate mail. “But most of the e-mails were grateful,” said Laura Kasman. ...

Part of what is giving the movement momentum is the proliferation of groups on college campuses. The Secular Student Alliance now has 146 chapters, up from 42 in 2003. At the University of South Carolina in Columbia, 19 students showed up for a recent evening meeting of the “Pastafarians,” named for the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, a popular spoof on religion dreamed up by an opponent of intelligent design, the idea that living organisms are so complex that the best explanation is that a higher intelligence designed them. ...

[pic of Flying Spaghetti Monster logo. Caption: *Have you been saved by the noodly deity?*]

In keeping with the new generation of atheist evangelists, the Pastafarian leaders say that their goal is not confrontation, or even winning converts, but changing the public’s stereotype of atheists. A favorite Pastafarian activity is to gather at a busy crossroads on campus with a sign offering “Free Hugs” from “Your Friendly Neighborhood Atheist.”

SHACKIN’ UP WITH GOD

John Rafferty

While over the last few years I have been trying to keep up with the prodigious literary output of Hitchens and Hedges, Dawkins and Dennett, et al—each of whom seems to be able to write faster than I can read—I have been vaguely aware of some bestseller-list background noise about something called *The Shack* flying off the shelves of bookstores’ “Christian” sections. I paid little attention, but the zeitgeist—in the form of references in freethought articles and mentions on talk shows (author Young would probably say God was tapping my mental shoulder)—would not be denied. So when a week ago my sister told me she had friends urging her to read it, and I was in B&N anyway, looking in vain for a new Donna Leon or Alan Furst, I figured what the hell.

Also, truth be told, I felt a little guilty about not only not having read “*The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity, A novel by Wm. Paul Young in collaboration with Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings,*” to give it its total title-page identification, but also about not knowing anything about it. Do I only read, only hear, only see what I

already agree with? Am I guilty of the intellectual sin one Marilynne Robinson, quoted in one of the book's chapter headings, describes?

We routinely disqualify testimony that would plead for extenuation. That is, we are so persuaded of the rightness of our judgment as to invalidate evidence that does not confirm us in it. Nothing that deserves to be called truth could ever be arrived at by such means.

Who, me? Am I as blinkered as the “mainstream media” and the “literary establishment,” whose biases are exposed by the fact that in a Google search I could not find a single “mm” or “lit crit” review of a book that's been on bestseller lists for two years, and whose publishers claim five million copies in print? Don't believe that? Start typing “Th ...” in the Books section on Amazon and watch *The Shack* come up instantly. Okay, I bought it, I read it in three Easy Readin' sessions, and I must admit that there's a lot to like about *The Shack*. This wrenching tale of the grieving Mackenzie Allen Phillips' weekend with God in the same wilderness shack in which his little girl was murdered is, first of all, an absorbing and well-written story. What's more, Mack's conversations with God in His/Her/Its three personae about the nature of God, about free will and God's omniscience, about the existence of evil and the transformative value of love and forgiveness (yes, even of the murderer) are no less sophisticated than the tedious tomes of saints and scholars for being brief, vernacular and, sometimes, witty.

Another recommendation? *The Shack* is driving both evangelical fundamentalists and old-line church hierarchs bananas. Author Young has been the toast of the daytime talk shows (including even nutcase Pat Robertson's 700 Club), where his message of “God is love – that's it, that's all you need to know” slots easily into TV's seven-minute segments. But the hard liners are outraged over Young's depictions of God the Father as an African-American woman (named Papa, no less) with a big behind and a sometimes “honey-chile” dialect; of Jesus as a young Jewish carpenter with a “near-Eastern” complexion and a big nose; and (less objectionably from their point of view) of the Holy Spirit as a shimmering, almost-out-of-focus Asian sylph-woman gardener named Sarayu.

Worse yet, as *USA Today* put it last year, the fundamentalists and the hierarchs “... read Young's message as saying you can just discover Jesus' love inside yourself, turn your life over to Him, and you're on your way to heaven. No need to put in time in the pews or know theology. [One theologian] trashes *The Shack* in his weekly radio show, calling it ‘deeply subversive,’ ‘scripturally incorrect’ and downright ‘dangerous.’ Says Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle: ‘If you haven't read *The Shack*, don't!’”

So, two cheers for *The Shack*, right? Well, one, maybe. Unless you're a believing Christian in the first place, *The Shack* is no more likely to “transform you,” or “to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his” (both promises on the book jacket) than is *Golf: The Best Instruction Book Ever*.

The Shack assumes the existence of the logically absurd triune God of Christianity, and every one of the two or three dozen named human characters in the book is a believing Christian – there is no other reality. All the Biblical stories, even the most ridiculous, are real, honest-to-God history. Adam and Eve? True, including the Tree and the Apple (no mention of the Serpent), the better to illustrate Papa/God's basic dictum: the only sin is “independence” from God; all the evil and misery in the world is the result of Adam and Eve's “original sin” of “independence” from God.

And that's what I find repellent about *The Shack*. For all its "All you need is love" sensibility and damn-near dismissal of organized religion (Sarayu says, "The Bible doesn't teach you to follow rules. It's a picture of Jesus." And Jesus himself says, "I'm not a Christian."), the book's message is the same one peddled by organized religion ever since religion got organized:

"For any created being, autonomy is lunacy. Freedom involves trust and obedience inside a relationship of love."

In other words, "Bow down before Me."

No.

OUR DAY OF REASON/WEEK OF REASON

WAS A HUGE SUCCESS

Reported by John Rafferty

A jammed-to-the-rafters crowd of 50 SHSNY and CFI-NYC members and friends filled the brick-walled upstairs dining room of Pete's Tavern ("the 1864 tavern O. Henry made famous") on Irving Place on May 3 for SHSNY Sunday brunch and a "Week of Reason" kickoff with philosopher Massimo Pigliucci. The food was good (and inexpensive), conversation buzzed up and down the three long tables at which new friends were made, SHSNY President Rafferty's remarks on the history of the national "Day of Prayer" were mercifully brief, and Professor Pigliucci wowed the group with a half-hour talk (and another half hour of lively Q&A) on "Reason: What Is It, and Who Needs It?"

We didn't record and transcribe the lecture and Q&A, but an excellent example of Professor Pigliucci's thought on reason appears below.

The freethought community's "Day of Reason" answer to the unconstitutional "National Day of Prayer" was celebrated four days after our Sunday brunch, on May 7. And thanks to the organizational skills of CFI-NYC Executive Director Michael De Dora we gathered again, this time at The New York Society for Ethical Culture on Central Park West. The event was an evening fundraiser for the Innocence Project, a national litigation and public policy organization that is dedicated to exonerating wrongly convicted people through DNA testing, and which has freed 235 innocent men and women from prison—16 of them from death row—since 1992.

Although four organizations (including NYC Skeptics) were involved, SHSNY members made up more than half of the small, rain-diminished audience, which dug into its pockets to come up with more than \$700 for the Project. Not bad.

FAITH & REASON

Massimo Pigliucci

(From www.rationallyspeaking.org, Prof. Pigliucci's website, April 14, 2009)

One of the constantly bewildering aspects of living on planet Earth is the assumption that most human beings seem to make that faith (usually, but not necessarily, the religious variety) is a virtue. This bizarre attitude—just to add insult to injury—often comes coupled with the equally strange idea that somehow too much reason is bad for you. Why?

Faith means that one believes something regardless or even in spite of the evidence. This, I should think, is so irrational, and potentially so bad for one's health, that educators and policy makers would be very worried at the prospect of a nation where faith was

praised and encouraged. I mean, suppose I tell you that I have faith in my auto mechanic, but then you discover that the guy knows nothing about cars, can never get one fixed, and on top of that charges me thousands of dollars every time I see him. You would be outraged at him, possibly to the point of calling for legal action against the rascal, and you would pity me for being such a fool. Now substitute any of the words “Preacher,” “Pope,” “Imam,” or even “Guru” for mechanic in the above example, change the care of my car to the care of my soul (whatever that is), and suddenly you get the phenomenon of strong social and legal defense of the concept of organized religion. How nut is that?

But Massimo, people usually ask me whenever the f-word is brought up, don’t you have faith in anything? Nope, I say, a denial that is immediately met with both bewilderment and commiseration. Don’t I have faith in my wife, for example? No, I trust her because I know her and know that she loves me. What about faith in humanity, considering that I profess to be a secular humanist? No, I have hope for the human lot, and even that is seriously tempered by my awareness of its less than stellar record throughout history.

Ah, but I believe in evolution, don’t I? Yes, I do, but notice the switch between “faith” and “belief,” two words that don’t necessarily mean the same thing at all. A belief is something one thinks is true, but beliefs — unlike faith — can be held in proportion to the available evidence and reasons in their favor. I “believe” in evolution because the evidence is overwhelming. I don’t have faith in evolution.

Okay, then, the irrepressible defender of faith might say, what about your acceptance of things you cannot possibly prove, either logically or empirically, such as that there is a physical world out there (instead of the universe being a simulation in someone’s mind)? Isn’t that faith? Nope, it’s a reasonable assumption that I adopt for purely pragmatic reasons, because it seems that if one rejects it apparently bad things will happen to him (like smashing his brains on the ground while believing that he can fly off of a skyscraper).

The exasperated faithful will then conclude that my life must be devoid of emotions, and that I am — once again — deserving of pity and commiseration more than anything else. But of course this is yet another common confusion that doesn’t hold up to scrutiny: my life is as emotionally rich as anyone else’s, I think, in accordance with both philosopher David Hume’s and neurobiologist Antonio Damasio’s conclusion that a healthy human existence requires a balance between reason and emotion. Without reason, we would not have been able to build our complex civilization; but without emotion we wouldn’t have given a damn about accomplishing anything at all. Still, while faith is obviously emotional, it is not a synonym of emotion; the latter is necessary, the former is parasitic on it.

What about this insane idea that somehow we live in a hyper-rational society which is already too burdened by the triumph of reason? If we are, it is hard to distinguish such a society from a hyper-irrational one dominated by faith. This conceit that too much reason is bad is a leftover from the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, the so-called “age of reason” (which lasted much too briefly, and during which time reason was heard, but hardly dominated human affairs). If one wants to have a good measure of how little reason plays into our society, one only has to listen for a day to what most of our politicians say, or to what most of our journalists write, not to mention of course the often

surprisingly frightening experience of simply overhearing people's conversations on the subway or at work.

We are frequently told with a certain degree of smugness that we need to go "beyond reason," even though that phrase is uttered by people who likely wouldn't be able to pass logic 101. Now, this isn't to say that reason is boundless, much less that it is a guarantor of truth. Reason is a tool, fashioned by natural selection to deal with largely mundane problems of survival and reproduction in a specific type of physical and social environment. But it seems to work pretty darn well even when it comes to proving complex mathematical theorems, constructing excellent hypotheses about how the universe got started, and even providing us with decent guidance on how to conduct human affairs while maximizing justice and minimizing killings, at least in theory.

Faith doesn't bring us beyond reason, as amply shown by the fact that not a single problem—be it scientific, philosophical or socio-political—has ever been solved or even mildly ameliorated by faith. On the contrary, faith has a nasty tendency to make bumbling simpletons of us, to waste our energies, time and resources on pursuits that do not improve the human condition, and at its worst convinces people to drive planes into skyscrapers, or to mount "holy" crusades to slaughter the "infidel." Faith is not a virtue, it is a repudiation of one of the few good things human beings have going for them: a little bit of reason.

In those parts of the world where learning and science have prevailed, miracles have ceased; but in those parts of it as are barbarous and ignorant, miracles are still in vogue. — *Ethan Allen, leader of the "Green Mountain Boys" and hero of the American Revolution.*

ISLAM, VIRGINS AND GRAPES

Nicholas D. Kristof

(Reprinted from the Op-Ed page of The NYTimes, 4/23/09)

In Afghanistan, 300 brave women marched to demand a measure of equal rights, defying a furious mob of about 1,000 people who spat, threw stones and called the women "whores." The marchers asserted that a woman should not need her husband's consent to go to school or work outside the home.

In Pakistan, the Taliban flogged a teenage girl in front of a crowd, as two men held her face down in the dirt. A video shows the girl, whose "crime" may have been to go out of her house alone, crying piteously that she will never break the rules again.

Muslim fundamentalists damage Islam far more than any number of Danish cartoonists ever could, for it's inevitably the extremists who capture the world's attention. But there is the beginning of an intellectual reform movement in the Islamic world, and one window into this awakening was an international conference [in mid-April] at the University of Notre Dame on the latest scholarship about the Koran.

"We're experiencing right now in Koranic studies a rise of interest analogous to the rise of critical Bible studies in the 19th century," said Gabriel Said Reynolds, a Notre Dame professor and organizer of the conference.

The Notre Dame conference probably could not have occurred in a Muslim country, for the rigorous application of historical analysis to the Koran is as controversial today in the Muslim world as its application to the Bible was in the 1800s. For some literal-

minded Christians, it was traumatic to discover that the ending of the Gospel of Mark, describing encounters with the resurrected Jesus, is stylistically different from the rest of Mark and is regarded by scholars as a later addition.

Likewise, Biblical scholars distressed the faithful by focusing on inconsistencies among the gospels. The Gospel of Matthew says that Judas hanged himself, while Acts describes him falling down in a field and dying; the Gospel of John disagrees with other gospels about whether the crucifixion occurred on Passover or the day before. For those who considered every word of the Bible literally God's word, this kind of scholarship felt sacrilegious.

Now those same discomfiting analytical tools are being applied to the Koran. At Notre Dame, scholars analyzed ancient texts of the Koran that show signs of writing that was erased and rewritten. Other scholars challenged traditional interpretations of the Koran such as the notion that some other person (perhaps Judas or Peter) was transformed to look like Jesus and crucified in his place, while Jesus himself escaped to heaven.

One scholar at the Notre Dame conference, who uses the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg for safety, has raised eyebrows and hackles by suggesting that the "houri" promised to martyrs when they reach Heaven doesn't actually mean "virgin" after all. He argues that instead it means "grapes," and since conceptions of paradise involved bounteous fruit, that might make sense. But suicide bombers presumably would be in for a disappointment if they reached the pearly gates and were presented 72 grapes.

One of the scholars at the Notre Dame conference whom I particularly admire is Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, an Egyptian Muslim who argues eloquently that if the Koran is interpreted sensibly in context then it carries a strong message of social justice and women's rights.

Dr. Abu Zayd's own career underscores the challenges that scholars face in the Muslim world. When he declared that keeping slave girls and taxing non-Muslims were contrary to Islam, he infuriated conservative judges. An Egyptian court declared that he couldn't be a real Muslim and thus divorced him from his wife. The couple fled to Europe, and Dr. Abu Zayd is helping the LibForAll Foundation, which promotes moderation throughout the Islamic world.

"The Islamic reformation started as early as the 19th century," notes Dr. Abu Zayd, and, of course, it has even earlier roots as well. One important school of Koranic scholarship, Mutazilism, held 1,000 years ago that the Koran need not be interpreted literally, and even today Iranian scholars are surprisingly open to critical scholarship and interpretations.

If the Islamic world is going to enjoy a revival, if fundamentalists are to be tamed, if women are to be employed more productively, then moderate interpretations of the Koran will have to gain ascendancy. There are signs of that, including a brand of "feminist Islam" that cites verses and traditions suggesting that the Prophet Muhammad favored women's rights.

Professor Reynolds says that Muslim scholars have asked that conference papers be translated into Arabic so that they can get a broader hearing. If the great intellectual fires are reawakening within Islam, after centuries of torpor, then that will be the best weapon yet against extremism.

**BRAD WHEELER'S LETTER TO *THE TIMES*
INVITES KRISTOFF BACK TO THE REAL WORLD**

To the Editor: Regarding Nicholas Kristof's April 23 column, "Islam, Virgins and Grapes" [see above], yes, just as in the Biblical traditions, moderation and reformation of various sorts within Islam would blunt the most horrible of the consequences arising from beliefs that its text was dictated by a deity.

But let's be honest. With both Bible and Koran, "critical scholarship," "apologetics," and even "moderation" are simply euphemisms for selectively explaining away or declaring as metaphor large swaths that are either absurd or self-contradictory, or which condone murder, slavery, and other violations of modern ethics.

The only way humanity will ever fully achieve peace and real appreciation of all our human sisters and brothers will be the day that the child-like and hugely divisive belief that a Sky Daddy produced guidebooks is as rare as belief in a flat Earth orbited by the Sun.

When that day arrives, humanity will be able to mine the true wisdom and beauty of all ancient scriptural texts without the blinders created by believing that one or the other is the last word of a preferred deity. The absurd, immoral, and savage sections will be rejected as the nonsense they are, rendering unnecessary the intricate and silly dances of apologetics. And all scriptures will be recognized as the product of ancient peoples who had human agendas and the human need to explain their world with stories, but who lived in a primitive and ignorant time. — *Robert B. Wheeler*

**AND MEANWHILE, BACK IN
THAT REAL MUSLIM WORLD ...**

Unhappy about women exercising and playing sports, even in women-only gyms, the refugees from the 13th century who serve as Saudi Arabia's supreme moral authorities are closing the gyms.

Female participation in sports has long been an issue in the kingdom, with Phys Ed banned from public girls' schools and clerics issuing prohibitions on female participation in sports. The result has been high rates of diabetes and even bone frailty among women, which the Ministry of Health says it wants to combat.

But, says Sheikh Abdullah al-Maneea, member of the official Supreme Council of Religious Scholars, "Football and basketball are sports that require a lot of movement and jumping." He said such excessive movement may harm girls who are still virgins, possibly causing them to lose their virginity.

Oh, well, case closed.

**WHILE IN THE WORLD'S MOST
SCIENTIFICALLY-ADVANCED COUNTRY ...**

Former SHSNY President Dennis Middlebrooks reports that at a March debate in Radio City Music Hall, right-wing spokeswoman Ann Coulter opined:

There is no scientific backing for evolution and the major defenders of Darwin are "feminist biologists" who are not real scientists, because biology is not a true science like physics and chemistry. And paleontologists are the major opponents of evolution and this has been suppressed by the media.

ONE REASON HUMANISTS ARE METS FANS

(Excerpted from "Fan fights NY Yankees 'God Bless America' ejection," by Larry Neumeister, Associated Press Writer, on yahoo.com, 4/15/09)

A baseball fan who says he was ejected from Yankee Stadium by NYPD police after he left his seat to use the bathroom during the playing of "God Bless America" is suing the New York Yankees and the city.

Bradford Campeau-Laurion, who does not participate in religious services and objects to being required to do so, says in his federal lawsuit his rights were violated last August at a game between the Yankees and the Boston Red Sox when he tried to pass a police officer. An officer twisted his arm behind his back, and two of them marched him down several ramps to the stadium's exit, where he was pushed out as one officer told him to leave the country if he didn't like it.

"God Bless America" was played at big league ballparks across the country when baseball resumed after the September 11, 2001, attacks. It was discontinued in some cities the following seasons but remained a fixture at Yankees games, at which security personnel and ushers use chains to block off some exits while it's played.

Comment: A few times at Shea Stadium (I haven't been to Citifield yet), I admonished young men to stand and uncover for the national anthem, but always sat with my cap on for "God bless America." As I explained once, It ain't the national anthem, and I don't believe in God. — JR

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS CORRECTLY DEFINED

The following is the winning entry in an annual contest at Texas A&M University calling for the most appropriate definition of a contemporary term. This year's term was Political Correctness.

The winner wrote:

"Political correctness is a doctrine, fostered by a delusional, illogical minority, and rabidly promoted by an unscrupulous mainstream media, which holds forth the proposition that it is entirely possible to pick up a turd by the clean end."

ONLY 16 SHOPPING DAYS TO XMAS

An Australian science magazine reports that astronomers who charted the night sky of 2,000 years ago claim that Jesus Christ was born on June 17 and that the Star of Bethlehem was a conjunction of two planets.

"Venus and Jupiter became very close in 2 B.C. and would have appeared to be one bright beacon of light," *Sky and Space* magazine editor Dave Reneke says. Using complex computer software and with St. Matthew's Gospel as a reference, the team of astronomers placed the nativity somewhere between 3 B.C. and 1 A.D.

Based on the astronomers' chart, Reneke calculated the date of the planetary conjunction—and therefore of the nativity—to be June 17, 2 B.C.

Comment: Or, possibly, it never happened at all. Ever.