

# PIQUE

## Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

### March, 2009

A month after the Darwin Bicentennial we celebrate the return of science to our national discourse, wonder about spirituality, Libertarianism, creationism, fideism and the ethnicity of Jesus, marvel at the Miracle on the Hudson, select the dumbthest, start a new SHSNY Contest, consider quick-frozen six-year-olds, atheist Arkansas politicians, Baal worship, barefoot boys and rationalist barmaids. And celebrate two-and-a-half words plainly spoken January 20th: "... and non-believers."— JR

#### THE 2008 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD: BEN STEIN SWEEPS THE FIELD!

[head shot pic of Stein]

Ben Stein—financial columnist, game show host and self-satisfied right-wing gadfly—produced and starred in the 2008 movie, "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed," which blamed the Holocaust on Charles Darwin and claimed that the only reason "Darwinism" is taught in the nation's schools is that an anti-religious, elitist academic cabal suppresses the "truth" of creationism. Promoting the movie last fall, Stein told a radio interviewer: "*Dachau is where science leads you. Love of God and compassion and empathy leads you to a glorious place, and science leads you to killing people.*"

For that morsel of mendacity, Stein garnered more votes—39 out of 66 (we told all 300-plus of you on our distribution lists that every vote would count)—than the other four 2008 Dumbth nominees put together. The not-so-coveted horse's ass trophy is his whenever he wants to pick it up. (Leave a message on the machine, Ben—we'll get back to you.)

How did the other nominees fare?

Oklahoma State Representative and anti-gay, pro-creationism activist **Sally Kern** was the surprise runner-up, with 11 votes, for her judgment that, "*Homosexuality is the biggest threat our country has, even more so than terrorism or Islam.*"

Perennial favorite **Ann Coulter**—our 2007 Dumbth Award winner for her remark that she just wanted Jews to be "perfected" by becoming Christians—impressed nine of our voters this year with her pronouncement that, "*Biologists believe in evolution, not real scientists like physicists and chemists.*"

Poor **Newt Gingrich**, once the most powerful politician in America, could muster only four votes ("Newt" *who?*) for his warning, after the anti-Proposition 8 demonstrations in California, that, "*There is a gay and secular fascism in this country that wants to impose its will on the rest of us, is prepared to use violence, to use harassment.*"

But the booby prize—only three votes—goes to right-wing radio bloviator **Michael Barone**, who fulminated that, "*The liberal media attacked Sarah Palin because she did not abort her Down syndrome baby. They wanted her to kill that child.*"

Nominations are now—and all through 2009—open for this year's "winner." Keep your eyes and ears open for the clueless, the fatuous, the anti-science and anti-reason

remarks with which our political, religious and media “leaders” are sure to gobsmack us, and send your nominations to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org).

[box]

### **IF YOU'RE NOT GETTING SHSNY E-MAIL**

Somewhere in the Twilight Zone I deleted part of the SHSNY e-mail Distribution List. I have rebuilt it, but know I'm missing at least some people whose last names begin with the letters G through M. To get back on (or start on) the list—never sold, shared or revealed—just e-mail [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org) — *JR*

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## **THE SCIENCE OF 44**

**Marty Kaplan**

*(Excerpted from The Huffington Post, 1/20/09)*

***“We will restore science to its rightful place.”***

That's the line I didn't see coming. Anyone watching the backgrounders leading up to the inaugural knew that the incoming President would call for “a new era of responsibility” ... that “the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long no longer apply,” that he would “proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics.” We might not have known that he would use First Corinthians to drive the point home— “the time has come to set aside childish things”—but to hear the political-media industry nailed as infantilizing was to situate the bloviators and bullies right in the middle-school playground where they belong. ...

But the jab that really took me by surprise was the repudiation of eight years of know-nothingism. The politicization of science at the behest of corporate despoilers of our land, air and water, and in the service of religious fundamentalism, constitutes a shameful legacy of greed and anti-intellectualism. On issues from stem cell research to climate change, from abstinence education to mercury pollution, the Republican war on science, as author Chris Mooney aptly names it, has spun the facts to fit the agenda.

It was bad enough that George W. Bush, as part of his effort to leave no child behind, wanted schools to teach the phony controversy between evolution and creationism. It was worse that the scientific method itself— an epistemology that puts evidence above ideology—was under assault. Worst of all is the cost to society of precious time lost, of medical discoveries not made, of scarce natural resources not conserved, of reproductive rights not protected, of planetary damage not contained.

There was another, related line in the inaugural address, that came after the promise to restore science to its rightful place, which I found, in a quiet way, breathtaking. ... “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus – and non-believers.”

Non-believers! For eight years, the now-departed Administration's media enablers on cable and talk radio have spat out the phrase “secular humanists” as if it denoted a species worse than communists, a traitorous fifth column of un-American doubters determined to destroy our Republic. And now, finally, we have a President unafraid to declare that skepticism and rationalism have just as legitimate a claim on the public sphere, and just as privileged a place in private hearts, as any other approach to the mysteries of the cosmos. ...

It is comforting to know that in the years to come, the difference between right and wrong will not be based entirely on faith.

## **ELEVATING SCIENCE, ELEVATING DEMOCRACY**

**Dennis Overbye**

*(Excerpted from The New York Times, 1/27/09)*

All right, I was weeping too. To be honest, the restoration of science was the least of it, but when Barack Obama proclaimed during his Inaugural Address that he would “restore science to its rightful place,” you could feel a dark cloud lifting like a sigh from the shoulders of the scientific community in this country.

When the new president went on vowing to harness the sun, the wind and the soil, and to “wield technology’s wonders,” I felt the glow of a spring sunrise washing my cheeks, and I could almost imagine I heard the music of swords being hammered into plowshares.

Wow. My first reaction was to worry that scientists were now in the awkward position of being expected to save the world. As they say, be careful what you wish for. My second reaction was to wonder what the “rightful place” of science in our society really is.

The answer, I would argue, is On a Pedestal – but not for the reasons you might think. Forget about penicillin, digital computers and even the Big Bang, passing fads all of them.

The knock on science from its cultural and religious critics is that it is arrogant and materialistic. It tells us wondrous things about nature and how to manipulate it, but not what we should do with this knowledge and power. The Big Bang doesn’t tell us how to live, or whether God loves us, or whether there is any God at all. It provides scant counsel on same-sex marriage or eating meat. It is silent on the desirability of mutual assured destruction as a strategy for deterring nuclear war.

Einstein echoed this thought when he said, “I have never obtained any ethical values from my scientific work.” Science teaches facts, not values, the story goes.

Worse, not only does it not provide any values of its own, say its detractors, it also undermines the ones we already have, devaluing anything it can’t measure, reducing sunsets to wavelengths and romance to jiggly hormones. It destroys myths and robs the universe of its magic and mystery. So the story goes.

But this is balderdash. Science is not a monument of received Truth but something that people do to look for truth. That endeavor, which has transformed the world in the last few centuries, does indeed teach values. Those values, among others, are honesty, doubt, respect for evidence, openness, accountability and tolerance and indeed hunger for opposing points of view. These are the unabashedly pragmatic working principles that guide the buzzing, testing, poking, probing, argumentative, gossiping, gadgety, joking, dreaming and tendentious cloud of activity—the writer and biologist Lewis Thomas once likened it to an anthill—that is slowly and thoroughly penetrating every nook and cranny of the world.

Nobody appeared in a cloud of smoke and taught scientists these virtues. This behavior simply evolved because it worked. It requires no metaphysical commitment to a God or any conception of human origin or nature to join in this game, just the hypothesis that nature can be interrogated and is the final arbiter. Jews, Catholics, Muslims, atheists,

Buddhists and Hindus have all been working side by side building the Large Hadron Collider and its detectors these last few years.

And indeed there is no leader, no grand plan, for this hive. It is in many ways utopian anarchy, a virtual community that lives as much on the Internet and in airport coffee shops as in any one place or time. Or at least it is as utopian as any community largely dependent on government and corporate financing can be.

Arguably science is the most successful human activity of all time. Which is not to say that life within it is always utopian, as several of my colleagues have pointed out in articles about pharmaceutical industry payments to medical researchers. But nobody was ever sent to prison for espousing the wrong value for the Hubble constant. There is always room for more data to argue over. ...

It is no coincidence that these are the same qualities that make for democracy and that they arose as a collective behavior about the same time that parliamentary democracies were appearing. If there is anything democracy requires and thrives on, it is the willingness to embrace debate and respect one another and the freedom to shun received wisdom. Science and democracy have always been twins.

### **ANTI-STEM CELL RESEARCH: THE LOGIC TRAP**

**Art Harris**

February 9 *Time* Magazine had a story on renewed stem cell research and featured a scientist named Douglas Melton of Harvard. This is a courageous man who waited out Bush 43 and is back working on science, not “Revealed Truth.”

Melton invited Richard Doerflinger of the U.S. Conference of Bishops to present arguments against stem cell research at a symposium on Science and Ethics. Melton asked Doerflinger if he considered a day-old embryo the moral equivalent of a six-year-old. When Doerflinger answered “Yes,” Melton asked why society accepts the freezing of embryos but not six-year-olds. There is no report of Doerflinger’s reply.

We ought to have a SHSNY award for people like Melton as well as the Dumbth for the dummies.

### **MIRACLE ON THE HUDSON**

**Barbara Lifton, Skeptical SHSNY Reporter**

January 15, 2009 was a banner day for the people of New York and New Jersey: a jetliner with more than 150 passengers “crash landed” on the Hudson River without losing a single passenger. According to eye-witnesses, the “miracle on the Hudson” was wrought not by the skill, experience, intelligence and maturity of the pilot and co-pilot, but by a miracle witnessed by hundreds of people on both banks of the river: *the plane walked on water!*

That’s right – the plane landed softly, then skimmed along on the surface until it came to a halt in the middle of the river without breaking up. And it didn’t sink immediately but, according to some witnesses, was held afloat by a mysterious figure in a flowing white robe, long locks of hair, a crown of thorns, and a dark beard, who was walking on the surface of the river. Those witnesses reported that he walked up and down the aisle of the plane twice, disguised as an airline pilot, to be sure that all passengers were safely off the plane.

Several video cameras were trained on the scene, but clearly this figure was transcendental and other-worldly, because he did not register on film. Churchmen and newspaper reporters all over the city, even though they had not technically witnessed this extraordinary event, nevertheless recognized its significance, with headlines that read: “MIRACLE ON THE HUDSON!”

The plane floated on the surface of the river down to Battery Park City, where it was moored to an underwater concrete support for that development. Unfortunately, the residents of the area, battered by 9/11 and living in large co-op and condo buildings with many apartments that are not selling in the current downturn, were unable to see the figure in the white robe who accompanied the plane; instead they asked the pilot if he would perhaps come and work for the Residents Association and help it sell apartments.

This reporter gathers, after some delicate interrogations of real estate moguls in the city, that only a “miracle” will save the city condominium market. In my opinion, however, the city’s “miracle” has already been wrought, because I don’t know anyone—except the moguls—who want more thirty-five story condos built with faulty cranes and scaffolding.

Maybe this was a “miracle” day after all.

*Ed: My favorite story from that day was of a young man named Josh who told interviewers that when the passengers were told to prepare for an emergency landing people around him took to praying out loud, while he took the safety instructions out of the seat pocket and read them. When the plane was in the water and people scrambled frantically to pull open the nearest door, he was able to tell them they had to push. — JR*

## **THE SHSNY BOOK CLUB READS SPIRITUALITY FOR THE SKEPTIC**

**By Robert C. Solomon**

**Reviewed by Robert. A. Murtha**

At our book club meeting at the Muhlenberg Library on January 22 we discussed *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life*, in which Professor Solomon asks: What if there were more to “spirituality” than religion and platitudinous New Age nonsense? What if “spirituality” could be severed from sectarianism and thoughtless banality both? We, Professor Solomon argues, have been missing out on something important. Spirituality, he has come to see, is nothing less than the “thoughtful love of life,” which he believes is not connected with faith in any sort of god. His search is for a noninstitutional, nonexclusive sense of spirituality which is not based on faith, is not anti science, is not otherworldly, is not uncritical and is not cultist or kinky. It is a Naturalized Spirituality.

He is frustrated at the extent that the notion of spirituality has been hijacked by New Age eccentrics and religions sectarians, and is disillusioned with philosophy as it is defined and taught. What was conceived as the love of wisdom has become a tedious technical enterprise. He has therefore studied philosophies the world around and concluded that philosophy cannot be severed from questions about spirituality. The philosophical emphasis on critical thinking has taken a devastating toll on the emotional engagement and commitment that lies in the heart of every beginning philosophy student.

Spirituality embraces both emotion and rationality, both religion and philosophy. Religion seems overly parochial and exclusive; spirituality is truly non-sectarian. That is what philosophy is all about.

### ***What is a Naturalized Spirituality?***

A good place to start is the experience of spirituality that most of us have in music that “sweeps us away,” takes us out of ourselves. It transports us to a larger world and forges a community with our fellow listeners.

Other examples of naturalized spirituality can be found if you look for them. The beauty and majesty of everything from mountains and deserts to the exquisite design of ordinary mosquitos. Like music, science transports one into a larger universe and forges a global community of fellows. This larger universe is this universe, this world, this nature.

Spirituality is found right here in our lives and in our world, not elsewhere. Spirituality is also found in our grandest passions, love above all, and in our sense of humanity and camaraderie, and in our sense of family.

There is awe and spirituality in the sense that we are not in complete control of our lives and that there are forces that determine our course which we don't understand that nevertheless, in retrospect, seem to have had some purpose. Solomon does not evoke monotheism by calling it “God” or even “Spirit” or “Fate.”

Hegel took great pains to downplay the importance of the individual and to stress the primacy of the social and his comprehension of the world as spirit. In contrast to the existential emphasis on angst and taking control of our lives, Hegel talked about “destiny” and “fate” and pointed out the futility of individual decision making in the face of the overwhelming force of the *Zeitgeist*. He embraced the passions but viewed them as suprapersonal, hardly individual at all. They are the passions of being caught up in life and “swept away,” the very opposite of the “take charge” resolutions of existentialism. The Hegelian picture is brutally portrayed by Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, where even Napoleon is the pawn of forces he cannot control.

The confrontation between Hegelianism and existentialism is the dominant philosophical problem of our times. We all need to get straight about our place in the world. How can we live and cope with the overwhelming difficulties and tragedies of life? How should we think about and deal with death? These are universal questions that they face us all.

In our time the world is being unified in human consciousness: How can we relate to others in terms of shared spirit and compassion? How can we come to terms with the awesome forces in the world without reducing them to simplicities? How can we cultivate the grand passions and minimize the petty ones? How can we maintain a sense of the big picture when we are so caught up in our hopes, fears, aspirations and the tempers and fashions of the times? These are the questions that lead us to spirituality.

Spirituality, like philosophy, is a coming to grips with the big picture and with its our need for a larger sense of our lives. Professor Solomon has always been concerned with the action-oriented questions: How should I live my life? What should I make of myself? Accordingly, he felt obliged to remain wholly secular. Even his interpretations of Hegel were light on spirit, which he construed in terms of social membership and shared values. He was captivated by Nietzsche and Sartre, both atheists. He has lately come to see another side of Nietzsche, who never rejected spirituality but rather, like Hegel, attempted to naturalize it. The idea is to recombine spirituality with science and nature

rather than play them off against one another. Death and tragedy provoke questions in even the most thoughtless amongst us that even the most thoughtful cannot answer. Even if we share a dogma with millions, the questions remain and the answers are to each her own.

Spirituality, he argues, is ultimately social and global, a sense of ourselves identified with others and the world which must be understood in terms of the transformation of the self. How we think and feel about ourselves has an impact on who we actually are (and became). The grand thoughts and passions of spirituality change us and make us different kinds of people. Spirituality is the process of transforming, not a conclusion or a philosophy to try on like a new pair of pants.

There was a spirited discussion of the book. Most of us thought that the world “spirituality” has become antithetical to the naturalistic world view and that talk about “spirituality for the skeptic” is not serviceable. My thought is that what Solomon is talking about is what Socrates called the “examined life,” i.e., a life worth living. The unexamined life is not only not worth living, in the end it is probably not even worth examining.

## **DARWIN’S 200TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION**

**Reported by Carlos Martin Mora**

The much-heralded New York Skeptics forum on Darwin’s bicentennial, “Darwin’s 200th Birthday Celebration,” was held at Pace University on February 7, and it lived up to its advance billing.

It was a pleasure to hear clear and succinct discussions of Darwin’s theories by speakers such as Massimo Pigliucci, Professor of Ecology, Evolution, and Philosophy at Stony Brook University and author of the forthcoming *Nonsense on Stilts*; and Matthew Chapman, film director, journalist, great-great grandson of Charles Darwin, and author of *40 Days and 40 Nights: Darwin, Intelligent Design, God, Oxycontin, and Other Oddities on Trial in Pennsylvania* — both SHSNY Honorary Members.

And I was delighted to have my general knowledge of evolutionary theory refined by John Rennie, Editor in Chief of *Scientific American* magazine.

Among the topics discussed was the tradition of anti-intellectualism in the United States (as opposed to Europe), and therefore the importance of teaching students evolution – “getting to them when they’re (very) young.” For me, that discussion alone was worth the time and the cost of my trip to Pace.

The question-and-answer session that followed the panel talk brought out fascinating corollary discussions, like the importance of bringing science into the mainstream, the use of blogs to popularize science, and the correlation between atheism and science. Fascinating.

## **A THOUGHT FOR SAINT PATRICK’S DAY**

Jesus was Irish. Think about it: He lived with his parents until He was 29 years old; He went out drinking with the lads the last night of his life; He thought his mother was a virgin, and herself a good woman, she thought He was God.

## **THE SHSNY BUS SLOGAN CONTEST**

By now most readers of PIQUE are aware of the London buses that have been carrying the humanist/atheist advertising message “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

[pic of Dawkins and young woman in front of London bus with ad]

The project is the brainchild of British Humanists and of Richard Dawkins, who not only provided start-up wherewithal but has generously matched contributions, helping to spread the mobile message on omnibuses all over the U.K., and generating similar campaigns in Australia and Italy – all of which have drawn the wrath of religious establishments while finding unexpected and surprising support among the various publics.

A new U.K. campaign will roll out this spring, and Dawkins has asked the rationalist public the world over for new side-of-the-bus poster headline suggestions. To submit an idea, go to <http://richarddawkins.net>.

***Meanwhile, let’s have our own contest.***

What secular humanist message would you suggest for the side of New York City busses plying Fifth Avenue, the Grand Concourse or Eastern Parkway? Remember, it has to be brief enough to be read at a (literally) passing glance, has to leave room for SHSNY identification and website address, and can’t contain obscenities (much as you’d like to) or any nastiness the Metropolitan Transit Authority could reject.

To get your juices flowing here are some suggestions from the Dawkins website, starting with an old Ira Gershwin lyric:

*The things that you’re liable, to read in the Bible, ain’t necessarily so.*

*Aren’t you too old to have an imaginary friend?*

*Atheism: Sleep in on Sunday mornings.*

*The sailor does not pray for wind, he learns to sail.*

*Only sheep need a shepherd.*

*Mithras, Zeus, Horus, Wotan ... Yahweh, Allah.*

*Religions: They can’t all be right; they can all be wrong.*

*Live your life – it’s the only one you’ve got.*

Send your suggestions to the P.O. Box listed on the first page or, much more handily, to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org).

***Note:*** *Before you accompany your slogan suggestion with a demand to know why SHSNY isn’t advertising in the most expensive media marketplace in the world, consider the extent of your willingness to serve on a fund-raising committee. – JR*

## **15 ANSWERS TO CREATIONIST NONSENSE**

### **Parts 5-6-7**

**John Rennie**

*(The “15 Answers” were given at ScientificAmerican.com in 2002. They are detailed, so we are reprinting two or three at a time. Answers 1-7 were given in December, 2008 and January and February, 2009. The rest will appear, two or three at a time, in future issues. — JR)*

The arguments that creationists use are typically specious and based on misunderstandings of (or outright lies about) evolution, but the number and diversity of the objections can put even well-informed people at a disadvantage. To help with



answering them, the following list rebuts some of the most common “scientific” arguments raised against evolution.

**8. *Mathematically, it is inconceivable that anything as complex as a protein, let alone a living cell or a human, could spring up by chance.***

Chance plays a part in evolution (for example, in the random mutations that can give rise to new traits), but evolution does not depend on chance to create organisms, proteins or other entities. Quite the opposite: natural selection, the principal known mechanism of evolution, harnesses nonrandom change by preserving “desirable” (adaptive) features and eliminating “undesirable” (nonadaptive) ones. As long as the forces of selection stay constant, natural selection can push evolution in one direction and produce sophisticated structures in surprisingly short times.

As an analogy, consider the 13-letter sequence “TOBEORNOTTOBE.” Those hypothetical million monkeys, each pecking out one phrase a second, could take as long as 78,800 years to find it among the 2613 sequences of that length. But in the 1980s Richard Hardison of Glendale College wrote a computer program that generated phrases randomly while preserving the positions of individual letters that happened to be correctly placed (in effect, selecting for phrases more like Hamlet’s). On average, the program re-created the phrase in just 336 iterations, less than 90 seconds. Even more amazing, it could reconstruct Shakespeare’s entire play in just four and a half days.

**9. *The Second Law of Thermodynamics says that systems must become more disordered over time. Living cells therefore could not have evolved from inanimate chemicals, and multicellular life could not have evolved from protozoa.***

This argument derives from a misunderstanding of the Second Law. If it were valid, mineral crystals and snowflakes would also be impossible, because they, too, are complex structures that form spontaneously from disordered parts.

The Second Law actually states that the total entropy of a closed system (one that no energy or matter leaves or enters) cannot decrease. Entropy is a physical concept often casually described as disorder, but it differs significantly from the conversational use of the word.

More important, however, the Second Law permits parts of a system to decrease in entropy as long as other parts experience an offsetting increase. Thus, our planet as a whole can grow more complex because the sun pours heat and light onto it, and the greater entropy associated with the sun’s nuclear fusion more than rebalances the scales. Simple organisms can fuel their rise toward complexity by consuming other forms of life and nonliving materials.

**10. *Mutations are essential to evolution theory, but mutations can only eliminate traits. They cannot produce new features.***

On the contrary, biology has catalogued many traits produced by point mutations (changes at precise positions in an organism’s DNA) – bacterial resistance to antibiotics, for example.

Mutations that arise in the homeobox (Hox) family of development-regulating genes in animals can also have complex effects. Hox genes direct where legs, wings, antennae and body segments should grow. In fruit flies, for instance, the mutation called Antennapedia causes legs to sprout where antennae should grow. These abnormal limbs are not functional, but their existence demonstrates that genetic mistakes can produce complex structures, which natural selection can then test for possible uses.

Moreover, molecular biology has discovered mechanisms for genetic change that go beyond point mutations, and these expand the ways in which new traits can appear. Functional modules within genes can be spliced together in novel ways. Whole genes can be accidentally duplicated in an organism's DNA, and the duplicates are free to mutate into genes for new, complex features. Comparisons of the DNA from a wide variety of organisms indicate that this is how the globin family of blood proteins evolved over millions of years.

## **STIRRING UP THE SNAKES**

**PZ Meyers, Pharyngula**

*(Reprinted from "Does Your State Forbid Atheists From Holding Public Office?" on Prof. Meyers' science blog Pharyngula, <http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/>)*

It's an ugly little open secret that Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas have constitutions that explicitly forbid atheists from holding state office. These laws are archaic and unenforceable in principle—they were all ruled unconstitutional in 1961—but of course they're still in effect across all 50 states in practice, since public opinion makes it almost impossible for an atheist to get elected to high office.

Now, though, a representative in Arkansas has submitted a bill to amend the Arkansas constitution and remove the prohibition of atheists. This could get very interesting, or it might not. If the Arkansas legislature does the sensible thing and simply and efficiently removes an old law that can't be enforced anyway, I will be pleased, but there won't be much drama.

Since when are legislatures sensible, however? I can imagine indignant Christians defending an unconstitutional law and insisting that it be kept on the books as a token of their contempt.

It is an awkward situation for the Christianist yahoos, because their constituencies might get inflamed, but on other hand, do they really want to go on record defending the indefensible?

I'm looking forward to it, and kudos to Green Party Rep. Richard Carroll of North Little Rock for poking a stick into this nest of snakes and stirring it up.

## **BAAL WORSHIP: THE POWER OF LIBERALISM**

*(From a conservative Web site Townhall.com column written by Matt Barber, who is an associate dean at the late Jerry Falwell's Liberty University School of Law, reported on From the War Room on salon.com, 12/22/08)*

Today's liberalism is largely a sanitized retread of an antiquated mythology – one that significantly predates the only truly progressive movement: biblical Christianity. ... Although they've now assumed a more contemporary flair, the fundamentals of Baal worship remain alive and well today. The principal pillars of Baalism were child sacrifice, sexual immorality (both heterosexual and homosexual) and pantheism (reverence of creation over the Creator).

Ritualistic Baal worship, in sum, looked a little like this: Adults would gather around the altar of Baal. Infants would then be burned alive as a sacrificial offering to the deity. Amid horrific screams and the stench of charred human flesh, congregants—men and women alike—would engage in bisexual orgies. The ritual of convenience was intended

to produce economic prosperity by prompting Baal to bring rain for the fertility of “mother earth.”

The natural consequences of such behavior—pregnancy and childbirth—and the associated financial burdens of “unplanned parenthood” were easily offset. One could either choose to engage in homosexual conduct or—with child sacrifice available on demand—could simply take part in another fertility ceremony to “terminate” the unwanted child.

Modern liberalism deviates little from its ancient predecessor. While its macabre rituals have been sanitized with flowery and euphemistic terms of art, its core tenets and practices remain eerily similar.

### **AWAY WITH ALL GODS (BAAL, TOO?)**

#### **A Debate Report by Giddian Beer**

On Sunday, January 25, I attended a debate sponsored by the Center For Inquiry/Harlem Community Chapter. The debate subject was “Away With All Gods.”

The principals were Rev. Lawrence E. Lucas, Deputy Director for Ministerial & Volunteer Services, NYC Dept. of Corrections, and Ms Sunsara Taylor, a writer for the newspaper *Revolution* and an “uncompromising atheist.” Sibanye, Coordinator of the Harlem Community Chapter, was moderator. About 80 people attended, many of whom participated, or tried to.

It soon became evident that Ms Taylor was really there to promote her communist ideology, believing—no doubt—that atheists would be receptive. Her vision is wildly utopian, and she absolutely refuses to acknowledge the devastation and misery wrought by communism wherever—except in Cuba—it has prevailed. Her purity of thought and her zeal are typical of religious fanatics.

Rev. Lucas provided standard arguments for the existence of God. Toward the end, he spoke of “evidence” for one god. I would have posed the following to him: We have a world where good luck and bad luck, virtue and wickedness, joy and misery all thrive. Wouldn’t this be evidence for multiple, competing gods working their magic and mischief rather than evidence for a single just and merciful god in charge of everything? Then we would not need such philosophical gymnastics as “We cannot know the mind of God” to explain the coexistence of so much pain inflicted even on the most innocent, along with so much gratification awarded to even the most evil.

In addition to being more consistent with the human condition, polytheistic religions are, by their very nature, more tolerant.

The debate suggested to me that the problem is not belief in the supernatural (astrology is stupid, but it causes few problems), the problem is religion. And the worst religions are the no-god and the one-god religions. So if we must have gods it’s better to have lots of them.

*Note: It might be suggested to Ms Taylor that one of the gods to be done away with should be Marx, or Lenin-Stalin-Mao, the Trinity of the Church of Communism. — JR*

The door of a bigoted mind opens outwards so that the only result of the pressure of facts upon it is to close it more snugly. — *Ogden Nash*

Roy Brown, 54, robbed the Capital One bank in Shreveport, Louisiana. He approached the teller with one hand under his jacket and told her that it was a robbery.

The teller handed Brown three stacks of bills but he only took a single \$100 bill and gave the rest back to her. He said he was homeless and hungry and left the bank.

The next day he surrendered to the police voluntarily and told them that his mother didn't raise him that way but that he needed money to stay at the detox center, had no other place to stay and was hungry.

In Caddo District Court, he pleaded guilty to first degree robbery. The judge gave him *15 years* in prison.

*Ed: Now, class, can you guess the color of Mr. Brown's skin? And the judge's? I thought you could.*

## **SECULAR DOUBLE STANDARDS**

### **Milton Verstandig**

In January PIQUE, an article by Arthur Harris, "Aux Armes," called for the removal of the tax-exempt status of any church that actively tries "to use secular law to enforce their beliefs on a general public." But this sets up a double standard, since we skeptics often want to do the exact same thing with secular law. For example, we want the government schools to teach Darwinian evolution. Yet what right do we have to impose our secular beliefs on those who do not want their children learning this theory?

Under the current system, even parents who want to have their children educated in a religious school are forced to support the public schools that teach Darwin. This leaves most parents unable to afford an alternative to public schools. So they must fight over the science curriculum in public schools, since that is where they must send their children. If these parents were not forced to pay taxes to support the public schools, many more would be able to send their children to private schools, and there would be less conflict over the curriculum in public schools.

Let me take another example that was discussed in Mr. Harris' article. In the area of marriage, we fight over the definition of marriage only because one definition must prevail. Thus one group's moral sense must be trampled upon by those of another group. How can we blame churches for getting involved in issues where important principles are at stake?

One thing all such conflicts have in common is the imposition by one group on another, using the force of the state. There are some areas where there is little choice, such as defining marriage, where the states issue marriage licenses. But there are many other areas where we create conflict by getting the government involved in issues we could address by private consensual actions. As long as we "use the secular law to enforce our beliefs" we will encourage conflict. In this case, our public school system is based on the belief that all children have a right to be educated, no matter the financial condition of their parents. But we have imposed this belief on our neighbors, since the only way to finance public schools is for the government to impose taxes on all.

Once we accept the tenet that enforcing values is a legitimate way to relate to our neighbors, we then have no reason to complain when more religious people participate in this system in the same way we do. The conclusion is that it is better for a free people to leave as many decisions as possible to voluntary agreements among private parties. This

is how we effectively mediate our diverse wishes, avoid embittering animosities, and best protect ourselves against all those who wish to impose their values on us.

## **LIBERTARIANISM: ROOTED IN REASON?**

**Chic Schissel**

I have never had a clear understanding of what is meant by “Libertarianism,” and Wayne Whitmore’s February article, “Secularism and Libertarianism: Rooted in Reason” increased my perplexity. Dr. Whitmore defines Libertarianism as a philosophy that “maximizes individual liberty” but then severely modifies this by adding “under a rule of law.” Rules of law restrict individual liberty. Perhaps Libertarianism is defined by the extent the law is allowed to limit individual liberty. But the examples given in the article do not make this degree clear.

He says government is wrong trying to “protect us from ourselves” – people are supposed to be informed and wise enough to make their own decisions. But “protecting us from ourselves” is generally considered an essential government function. No one is all knowing and all wise and capable of making intelligent decisions in every area, and the government reasonably steps in to protect us from stupid action. Licensing of professionals is an example. If I wanted to have a tooth filled or my appendix taken out by Joe the Plumber should this be allowed? Or if I wanted to drive a car, despite having no experience driving, should this be allowed? Or, when driving, if I thought that a red light was interfering with my individual freedom to keep going, should I be allowed to ignore the red light?

A functioning society requires surrendering quite a few individual rights.

Dr. Whitmore’s stance on healthcare is disturbing: he says no one has a right to healthcare at someone else’s expense. But a compassionate culture tries to even out the luck of the draw. Some people work hard and honestly all their lives and barely get by; some are born into wealth; some come to wealth dishonestly. To deny necessary health care to those who can’t afford it is cruel and has no place in a caring society.

Would Dr. Whitmore enlarge this principle to police and fire protection and public education? (Why should a poor person have police protection at someone else’s expense?)

In the “Tell Obama What to Do” article he suggests that we “stimulate the economy by ending the income tax, instituting a national sales tax instead.” He claims this would tax the wealthy who consume the most. However, the well-off do not spend all their income but the poor must, so the poor would pay tax on 100 percent of their income while the wealthy would pay proportionately much less. This massive regressive tax would devastate the poor.

Dr. Whitmore gives speculative arguments why these Libertarian policies would lead to an improved society, but to me they are not convincing.

## **THE BARMAID EMBRACES FIDEISM**

*(Reprinted from the online cartoon JesusAndMo.com)*

**Jesus:** I’ve got a new one to try on the barmaid – fideism.

**Mohammed:** What’s that?

**Jesus:** The idea that faith is superior to reason as a means of knowing the truth.

**Mo:** Ah, yes – “I believe it, therefore it is true.”

**Jesus:** *Exactly* – and if it's true, you'd be stupid not to believe it.

**Mo:** I am sympathetic to the idea, but I don't think the barmaid will be impressed.

*(Jesus and Mo sitting at the bar)*

**Barmaid:** How *clever!* Could you believe I'm rich, please?

**Mo:** Told you.

Whatever a man prays for, he prays for a miracle. Every prayer reduces itself to this:  
Great God, grant that twice two be not four. — *Ivan Turgenev*

What makes a freethinker is not his beliefs but the way in which he holds them. If he holds them because his elders told him they were true when he was young, or if he holds them because if he didn't he would be unhappy, his thought is not free. But if he holds them because after careful thought he finds the balance of evidence in their favor, then his thought is free, however odd his conclusions may seem. — *Bertrand Russell*

Knowing what  
Thou knowest not  
Is in a sense  
Omniscience. — *Piet Hein*

**ALBERT SCHWEITZER, DR. LIVINGSTON  
AND THE SHOE LADY**

**John Rafferty**

A conservative friend who loves to yank my liberal and secular chains e-mailed me the fairy tale below, with the tongue-in-(his)-cheek admonition that “These [religious] people have to be stopped; they’ll say anything to generate good pr and sympathy and to further their myths.” Here’s the tale ...

*An eyewitness account from New York City, on a cold day in December, some years ago:*

*A little boy, about 10 years old, was standing before a shoe store, barefooted, peering through the window, and shivering with cold. A lady approached him and said, “My, but you’re in deep thought staring in that window!”*

*“I was asking God to give me a pair of shoes,” was the boy’s reply.*

*The lady took him by the hand, went into the store and asked the clerk to get half a dozen pairs of socks and a basin of water and a towel. He quickly brought all that to her. She washed and dried the little fellow’s feet, put a pair of the new socks on him, and then purchased him a pair of shoes. She gave him the remaining socks, patted him on the head and said, “No doubt, you will be more comfortable now.”*

*As she turned to go, the astonished kid caught her by the hand, and looking up into her face, with tears in his eyes, asked her, “Are you God’s wife?”*

I replied: Awww ... what a beautiful story, and I’m sure it really happened. But I wonder what happened next.

*1. The little boy waited until the lady went on her way, gave the clerk the shoes and socks back, collected his half of the money she had spent, and went back outside to resume his barefoot-and-shivering station in anticipation of the next mark.*

*2. Touched by the little boy’s question, the lady took him (obviously an orphan) by the hand, walked him to her church and placed him in the care of her parish priest, who fed, clothed and regularly buggered the kid for the next five years.*

*3. “God’s WIFE?” the lady shouted, “What makes you think God is a man, you sexist little pig?” She yanked the shoes off, threw them and the socks at the clerk, demanded her money back, and stormed out of the store, followed by the boy, whom the clerk threw out bodily and, once again, barefoot.*

Humanists have no quarrel with the religiously altruistic Albert Schweitzers, Dr. Livingstons and Shoe Ladies of the world – why would we? People like that would lead love-thy-neighbor “Christian” lives if they’d never heard of Christ – or Yahweh or Allah or Vishnu.

It’s not the good people, it’s the rotten religion.

**TWO PICTURES WORTH A MILLION WORDS**

**Colin Rafferty**

[Pic of George W. Bush signing document, surrounded nine white men in dark suits]

Caption: *Signing the Partial Birth Abortion Act of 2003*

Pic of Barack Obama handing off document-signing pen, surrounded by varied women]  
Caption: Signing the Lily Ledbetter Fair Play Act of 2009

[box]

So keep fighting for freedom and justice, beloveds, but don't forget to have fun doing it. Be outrageous, ridicule the fraidy-cats, rejoice in all the oddities that freedom can produce.

And when you get through kickin' ass and celebrating the sheer joy of a good fight, be sure to tell those who come after how much fun it was. — *Molly Ivins, 1944-2007*

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