

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

October, 2009

Do even some scientists draw a virtual creationist line at human psychology, i.e.: are we hard-wired for morality, ethics and "God?" Or did we grow our own in the usual messy evolutionary way? This month we look at a few of the arguments. Herein, too, we defend scatology, take a citizenship test, challenge Jimmy Carter, sample Sky Cake, celebrate Hindu America, analyze Tooth Fairy Science and rescue "left behind" puppies. Let's start with some ecumenical good news. — JR

THE GODLESS MAFIA MEETS A Report on the Reasonable Roundtable, the United Coalition of Reason – and Us by John Rafferty

At the instigation of Rich (Richie's List, Drinking with Atheists) Sander, the capos and consiglieri of NYC's freethought "families" gathered on August 12 in John (NYC Philosophy) Broughton's backyard for barbecue and polite/political compromise.

The meeting had a twofold purpose: to avoid more of the scheduling conflicts we've had recently, and to find more ways to work together productively.

Joining Rich and John, Scott Stafiej (sitting in for Michael DeDora) represented Center for Inquiry/NYC; Jason Torpy represented Military Atheists, Agnostics & Freethinkers (MAAF); Janice Busby repped The New York Society for Ethical Culture; Massimo Pigliucci Philosophy Now; Charlie Zorn The Brights, and Beth Zucker Drinking with Atheists.

SHSNY was represented by Vice President Elaine Lynn, Events Coordinator Lee Loshak, Giddian Beer and President John Rafferty.

The Reasonable Roundtable

We accomplished our first purpose by across-the-table give-and-take. SHSNY will schedule brunches on the third Sunday of the month (avoiding two others) and will consult month-by-month with Massimo regarding our Monday Movie Nights and his Philosophy Now meets.

Before we could schedule another meeting of our new Reasonable Roundtable—we were/are thinking of

quarterly get-togethers—we were all invited to dinner at a West Side pub September 2 to meet Jende Huang of The United Coalition of Reason, a national organization, funded by an anonymous rich donor, which helps promote local freethought coalitions like the one we had just formed.

At that meeting and a subsequent one September 8, the same usual-suspect organizations were represented, along with new recruits Freethought Action (Jan Meshon) and NY Skeptics (represented by Massimo). When asked if SHSNY would join UCoR, Elaine Lynn and John Rafferty conferred silently (arched eyebrows, shoulder shrugs) and agreed.

BigAppleCoR.org

Over the course of the two meetings our new Reasonable Roundtable agreed to call our new UCoR-built-and-sponsored website (which will advise and direct the curious and the searching to the various organizations in the coalition) BigAppleCoR.org, and to promote a new book, *Good Without God*, by Greg Epstein, to be published October 28.

Discussion as to how we (the coalition) will spend UCoR's money on this first project is ongoing, but we will probably tie in with UCoR's "good without God" theme. Making it local, and based on the fact that one in seven American adults now answers "None" to the question "What is your religion?" our working theme is:

A million New Yorkers are
good without God.

– BigAppleCoR.org.

Stay tuned – this might be fun.

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Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only \$30.

Articles published in PIQUE are archived in <http://www.shsny.org>. They may be reprinted, in full or in part, in other newsletters. The URL (<http://www.shsny.org>) should be referenced.

SHSNY is a member of the Council for Secular Humanism.

WE ARE ALL HINDUS NOW

Lisa Miller

(Reprinted from Newsweek, 8/15/09)

America is not a Christian nation. We are, it is true, a nation founded by Christians, and according to a 2008 survey, 76 percent of us continue to identify as Christian (still, that's the lowest percentage in American history). Of course, we are not a Hindu—or Muslim, or Jewish, or Wiccan—nation, either. A million-plus Hindus live in the United States, a fraction of the billion who live on Earth. But recent poll data show that conceptually, at least, we are slowly becoming more like Hindus and less like traditional Christians in the ways we think about God, our selves, each other, and eternity.

The Rig Veda, the most ancient Hindu scripture, says this: "Truth is One, but the sages speak of it by many names." A Hindu believes there are many paths to God. Jesus is one way, the Qur'an is another, yoga practice is a third. None is better than any other; all are equal. The most traditional, conservative Christians have not been taught to think like this. They learn in Sunday school that their religion is true, and others are false. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me."

Americans are no longer buying it. According to a 2008 Pew Forum survey, 65 percent of us believe that "many religions can lead to eternal life" — including 37 percent of white evangelicals, the group most likely to believe that salvation is theirs alone. Also, the number of people who seek spiritual truth outside church is growing. Thirty percent of Americans call themselves "spiritual, not religious," up from 24 percent in 2005.

Boston University religion professor Stephen Prothero has long framed the American propensity for "the divine-deli-cafeteria religion" as "very much in the spirit of Hinduism. You're not picking and choosing from different religions, because they're all the same. It isn't about orthodoxy. It's about whatever works. If going to yoga works, great — and if going to Catholic mass works, great. And if going to Catholic mass plus the yoga plus the Buddhist retreat works, that's great, too."

Then there's the question of what happens when you die. Christians traditionally believe that bodies and souls are sacred, that together they comprise the "self," and that at the end of time they will be reunited in the Resurrection. ... Hindus believe no such thing. At death, the body burns on a pyre, while the spirit—where identity resides—escapes. In reincarnation, central to Hinduism, selves come back to earth again and again in different bodies. So here is another way in which Americans are becoming more Hindu: 24 percent of Americans say they believe in reincarnation, according to a 2008 Harris poll. So agnostic are we about the ulti-

mate fates of our bodies that we're burning them—like Hindu—after death. More than a third of Americans now choose cremation, up from 6 percent in 1975. "I do think the more spiritual role of religion tends to deemphasize some of the more starkly literal interpretations of the Resurrection," agrees Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion at Harvard.

So let us all say "om."

TED KENNEDY ON CHURCH AND STATE

Derek C. Araujo

On August 25 America lost one of the most effective lawmakers ever to serve in the United States Senate. Edward M. Kennedy was a devout Catholic who understood the constitutional limits on religious intrusion into government. Like his brother John, Ted held a deep appreciation for the constitutional principle of separation of church and state. On this issue he was by no means perfect; he sponsored the ill-advised Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 with Orrin Hatch. But Senator Kennedy generally held a thorough understanding of religious liberty, church-state separation and the intersection of piety and politics.

That understanding was on display in his October, 1983 speech to Jerry Falwell's Liberty Baptist College (now Liberty University). Many of today's lawmakers would learn from a careful listening to this speech. Some choice remarks include the following:

Respect for conscience is most in jeopardy, and the harmony of our diverse society is most at risk, when we re-establish, directly or indirectly, a religious test for public office. That relic of the colonial era, which is specifically prohibited in the Constitution, has reappeared in recent years. . . . Two centuries ago, the victims were Catholics and Jews. In the 1980s the victims could be atheists; in some other day or decade, they could be the members of the Thomas Road Baptist Church.

In applying religious values, we must respect the integrity of public debate. In that debate, faith is no substitute for facts.

I hope for an America where neither "fundamentalist" nor "humanist" will be a dirty word, but a fair description of the different ways in which people of goodwill look at life and into their own souls. I hope for an America where no president, no public official, no individual will ever be deemed a greater or lesser American because of religious doubt — or religious belief.

Rest in peace, Senator. Although the Jerry Falwells of the world will not miss you, we humanists surely will. (Derek C. Araujo is Vice President and General Counsel of the Center for Inquiry.)

SHSNY (AND FRIENDS) FIGHT CATHOLIC LEAGUE CENSORSHIP

John Rafferty

The following email was sent to the entire SHSNY e-mail distribution list September 4:

Subject: Members and Friends of SHSNY: Fight Catholic League censorship.

The Showtime premium cable channel (owned by CBS) airs the excellent weekly "Penn & Teller: Bullshit." The magicians/comedians take on a different b.s. topic every week, e.g.: astrology, lie detectors, feng shui, "organic" foods, etc. I certainly don't agree with everything they do or say – they think global warming is a scam, for instance – but what they do wonderfully well is expose mendacity, hypocrisy and idiocy.

Last week they outdid themselves with "Penn & Teller: Bullshit: The Vatican." It was an attack on an obscenely rich (true) institution that protects pedophiles (true), subjugates women (true), fights against science (true) and actually promotes the spread of AIDS in Africa by refusing to let its clinics distribute condoms and by condemning their use as "sin" (true and true). The show focused on an Italian comedian, a woman whom the church is trying to have imprisoned for mocking the Pope, another "sin."

What the avowed atheists Penn and Teller did not do was attack Catholicism or the Catholic faithful in general. But they blistered the Pope and the Vatican, and I'd challenge anyone to point to a single untruth or even exaggeration in a show I watched very carefully.

And now the fundamentalist Catholic right has struck back with the weapon they just about invented – censorship.

The Catholic League is trying to flood Showtime and CBS with demands that Penn & Teller be taken off the air. CL head Bill Donohue (whose mendacious "defense" of the church's coverup of pedophilia in Ireland was described in July PIQUE) has taken to calling the two comedians "Nazis." How tone deaf do you have to be to call "Nazis" the opponents of the Pope, who wore a Nazi uniform, and the Vatican, which legitimized the new Nazi regime with its infamous concordat, and which never did get around to excommunicating baptized-Catholic Adolph Hitler?

Please help fight this censorship. Dennis Middlebrooks has dug up the e-addresses of two CBS executives whose spines we must stiffen. They are Nancy Tellem, in charge of programming at both Showtime and CBS – nancy.tellem@tvc.cbs.com, and Les Moonves, CBS's CEO – les.moonves@tvc.cbs.com.

This is what I wrote:

Dear Ms. Tellem:

Please resist the vicious attacks of the right-wingers who

would have you cancel Penn & Teller's excellent—and I believe important—show. CBS has a long and proud history, going back to Edward R. Murrow, of "telling it like it is." Whatever anyone thinks of Penn & Teller's attitude, there was not a single untruth in "Penn & Teller: Bullshit: The Vatican." They have every right to tell the truth as they see it, and CBS and Showtime have every right to air it. Congratulations on doing so. Keep up the good work.

John Rafferty, President

Secular Humanist Society of New York

Please do likewise! Write a short note to CBS and Showtime.

The response—thank you all—was outstanding. I received 41 cc's of e-mails sent, including eight that also forwarded the message to other distribution lists, furthering its reach. One particularly well-reasoned letter was sent by the former Editor of PIQUE.

Dear Ms. Tellem:

Let me add my voice to the protests against the demand that Penn and Teller be dropped from your schedule because of their criticism of the Roman Catholic Church.

The highest justification for freedom of expression is the freedom of listening. If someone is prevented from speaking, I am prevented from hearing what he has to say. My rights are infringed as much as his, the more so when I disagree with him. Hearing yet again what I already believe may be comforting, but enlightenment comes from hearing an opinion opposite to mine. If I change my opinion, I have rid myself of an opinion that now appears to me to be false and have replaced it with an opinion that now appears to me to be true. To me, that is a clear gain.

The doctrine that offensive speech should be censored denies the whole concept of free speech. Any opinion is offensive to someone, often to many. My anger would be no less if the proposed censorship were directed at speech offensive to African-Americans, white racists, feminists, or male chauvinist pigs.

Very truly yours,

John Arents

JESUS, MO & THE BARMAID ON SILENCE AND MOCKERY

(Transcribed from www.jesusandmo.net/2009/09/01/shut/)

Jesus: The new atheists are trying to make religious people shut up.

Mohammed: But freedom of expression is our human right, and we will not be intimidated into silence.

Barmaid: I don't want you to shut up. How am I supposed to make fun of you if you don't say anything?

Jesus: God will not be mocked, barmaid.

Barmaid: Ha, ha, ha!

Mo: Shut up.

YOU CAN'T SUE GOD. NO, REALLY, YOU CAN'T (Forwarded from BBC.com by Flash Light)

Long-time Nebraska state senator Ernie Chambers—an avowed atheist—has lost his lawsuit against God. In his suit, Mr. Chambers said God had threatened him and the people of Nebraska and had inflicted “widespread death, destruction and terrorization of millions upon millions of the Earth’s inhabitants.”

But Judge Marlon Polk has ruled that a plaintiff must have access to the defendant for a case to proceed. “Given that this court finds that there can never be service effectuated on the named defendant, this action will be dismissed with prejudice.”

“With prejudice” means Mr. Chambers can’t refile, but he can appeal – which he might do using the logic that the court has acknowledged the existence of God and “a consequence of that acknowledgement is a recognition of God’s omniscience.

“Since God knows everything,” he reasons, “God has notice of this lawsuit.”

Comment: Flash Light notes that a similar case in India was dismissed for the same reason, but wonders: “Why didn’t Chambers give an address such as The Vatican? Would the Pope have denied God was there, or admitted he couldn’t get in touch with Him and sent back the papers served.”

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY IS AS BEYOND-A-DOUBT TRUE AS IS EVOLUTION **Alexander Nussbaum**

(This is Dr. Nussbaum’s response to The NYTimes Op-Ed columnist David Brooks’ “Human Nature Today,” reprinted as “Evolutionary Psychology” in September PIQUE.)

My doctoral dissertation was on evolutionary psychology, and involved experimentally testing hypothesis on sexual strategies derived from evolutionary mating theory. Like all branches of science involving evolution, my area is denied and derided by biblical dogmatists, but it has the added misfortune of being denied and derided by dogmatists of the Marxist church of political correctness.

The evidence for evolutionary psychology is as overwhelming as the evidence for evolution. Evolutionary psychology is the idea that evolution produced the human brain as it did all life, using the same Darwinian algorithm that it always must use – there is no other possibility. Evolutionary theory is the sole explanation for animals, their bodies, brains and behavior. For all animals, including human. Deniers of evolution do so to propagate biblical religion; deniers of evolutionary psychology do so to propagate the religion of unbridled social engineering.

I taught for a semester at a college under Orthodox Jewish auspices, where I encountered young earth geo-

centrics with PhDs, and discussed my dissertation—and its “controversial” research—with the students there. “Of course,” they understood, “evolution and sex, what could be more forbidden?” Then I explained it was also controversial at a secular college because it violated a different set of dogmas, mentioning Harvard biology professor Richard Lewontin’s famous quote, “There is nothing in Marx, Lenin or Mao that is or can be in contradiction with a particular set of phenomena in the objective world.”

Indeed, when my advisor spoke about other research we did on the same area in a colloquium, he encountered verbal hostility from his peers. He never wrote up that research, despite being told by a famous evolutionary psychologist that it was textbook material.

Whenever I taught sensation and perception or neuropsychology I pointed out to students that animals’ senses and abilities reflect the minimum needed for the niche in the environment they evolved in. Evolution cannot produce more than what is necessary for survival, anything beyond that is a waste of energy that handicaps survival and will be weeded out (witness cavefish that have lost their eyes). Compare that to the products of intelligent design such as watches (often used in a favorite misguided analogy by creationists). A Bell & Ross Hydromax watch is water resistant to 11,100 meters, deeper than the lowest point in the ocean. The record for a scuba dive depth is 330 meters and modern nuclear submarines would be crushed at 700 meters. The watch is engineered to specifications far beyond what’s needed for its use. Evolution does not allow for that kind of luxury. The human brain could not have, even in theory, evolved as an “all purpose” problem solver. Like all products of evolution it evolved in a specific environment to cope with specific problems – those who maintain otherwise are in effect advocating creationism.

The problem is that the process of evolution that has produced the human brain can never produce optimal design — evolution is an on-the-cheap artist. What evolves is a jerry-built system good enough to produce reproductive success, and not much more. The human brain evolved to be a belief generator. It appears that Homo sapiens, ironically, have not evolved the cognitive architecture to accept being—body and mind—a product of evolution.

The January, 2009 issue of Scientific American was devoted to evolution, in its words “the most powerful idea in science.” Articles claim that evolution is responsible for our propensity for hernias and hiccups, has made contributions to health care and law enforcement, and is in fact essential to our understanding of everything – well, everything but the human mind. An article by David Buller on the “fallacies’ of evolutionary psy-

chology labels research by its most accomplished experimental psychologists “pop ep.”

A non-evolutionary psychology is equivalent to a non-evolutionary biology. If we are forced by politics to believe that the human brain was magically formed so it bears no mark of its evolution, we might as well go back to the biblical story.

It is scientifically unassailable that we process information utilizing cognitive mechanisms evolved over millions of years to solve particular survival problems in ancestral environments. As put by Tooby and Cosmides (two of Buller’s “pop ep” psychologists), we are “equipped with an extensive set of evolved information-processing algorithms that are contingently sensitive to a long list of situational contents and contexts.”

The humanistic and rational spirit of free inquiry and expression is under attack by a segment of the world determined to send humanity into a final dark age. And those who twist and deride science like evolutionary psychology for political correctness are accomplices. (Ed: SHSNY’er Alexander Nussbaum is a contributor, with A. Frey, to *Personality Theories: Critical Perspectives*, Ellis, A. & Abrams, M. with Abrams, L., Sage Press, 2009.)

(UN)WIRED FOR GOD **Sharon Begley**

(Excerpted from Newsweek, August 13, 2009)

At last check, intimations of mortality had not been banished from the human mind—the Grim Reaper still stalks our thoughts. Nor have our brain circuits shaken their habit of perceiving patterns in chaos, such as seeing the face of Jesus in a piece of burned toast; imagining the invisible hand of a supernatural agent in acts of randomness, as in “answered” prayers; and conjuring what anthropologist Pascal Boyer of Washington University calls “non-physically present agents.” We use the same circuitry to envision “what if” scenarios about our pasts or futures as we do to imagine angels and demons. Yet scientists have invoked both the fear of death and the fact that normal mental processes predispose us to belief in the supernatural to explain the near universality of religious faith down through the ages. (Of course, humans might believe in God because a deity designed that belief into our brains, but that hypothesis is not amenable to scientific investigation.) But there’s nothing like facts to spoil a good story.

Before I get to the pesky new data, it’s worth emphasizing that there are intriguing neurobiological findings suggesting that the brain may indeed be wired for God. In addition to the habits of thought that lead us to see the supernatural in the natural and the extraordinary in the ordinary, neuroimaging studies suggest that we come preloaded with the software for belief. For

instance, the brain has a region, the parietal lobe, that detects where our body physically ends and the larger world begins. But this circuitry can be silenced by intense prayer or meditation, neuroscientist Andrew Newberg has found, producing a sense of oneness with the cosmos or God.

There is a common belief that if some trait or behavior is wired into the brain, it is unchangeable, inevitable. (The same goes for anything genetically based, but we’ll leave that myth to another day.) Which makes the latest data on religiosity even more fascinating.

In brief, the number of American non-believers has doubled since 1990, a 2008 Pew survey found, and increased even more in some other advanced democracies. What’s curious is not so much the overall decline of belief (which has caused the Vatican to lament the de-Christianization of Europe) as the pattern. In a paper last month in the online journal *Evolutionary Psychology*, Gregory Paul finds that countries with the lowest rates of social dysfunction—based on 25 measures, including rates of homicide, abortion, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, unemployment, and poverty—have become the most secular. Those with the most dysfunction, such as Portugal and the U.S., are the most religious, as measured by self-professed belief, church attendance, habits of prayer, and the like.

I’ll leave to braver souls the question of whether religiosity leads to social dysfunction, as the new breed of public atheists contends. More interesting is the fact that if social progress can snuff out religious belief in millions of people, as Paul notes, then one must question “the idea that religiosity and belief in the supernatural is the default mode of the brain.” As he wrote in a new paper, “The ease with which large populations abandon serious theism when conditions are sufficiently benign ... refutes hypotheses that religious belief and practice are the normal, deeply set human mental state.” He posits that, rather than being wired into the brain, religion is a way to cope with stress in a dysfunctional society—the opium-of-the-people argument.

This doesn’t have to be an either-or proposition, however. The brain may indeed be predisposed to supernatural beliefs. But that predisposition may need environmental input to be fully realized.

Something like that seems to explain a number of animal behaviors that have long been thought of as innate. For instance, ducks are supposedly wired to prefer their mother’s call and not, say, a goose’s. But in the egg, ducklings hear the sounds of their mother, their embryonic siblings, and themselves; deprived of those experiences, they do not exhibit the “hard-wired” imprinting. Similarly, studies seem to show that fish have an innate sense of geometric direction. But if the

fish do not first explore their tank, their sense of direction stinks, suggesting that they acquire it and are not born with it. "Researchers sometimes claim we're hard-wired for things, but when you peel through the layers of the experiments, the details matter and suddenly the evidence doesn't seem so compelling," says psychologist John Spencer of the University of Iowa.

Before we decide that a behavior is wired into our neurons, it would be a good idea to examine whether it withstands changes in our circumstances. If new neuroscience has taught us anything, it's that the lives we lead can reach into, and change, our very brain circuitry.

MORALITY: EVOLVED, OR PART OF THE REALITY OF THE UNIVERSE?

Robert Wright

(Excerpted from Mr. Wright's Op Ed, "A Grand Bargain Over Evolution" in The New York Times, 8/23/09)

If evolution does tend to eventually "converge" on certain moral intuitions, does that mean there were moral rules "out there" from the beginning, before humans became aware of them – that natural selection didn't "invent" human moral intuitions so much as "discover" them? That would be good news for any believers who want to preserve as much of the spirit of [Christian apologist] C. S. Lewis as Darwinism permits.

Something like this has been suggested by the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, who, as a contented atheist, can't be accused of special pleading.

Mr. Pinker has noted how the interplay of evolved intuition and the dynamics of discourse tend to forge agreement on something like the golden rule – that you should treat people as you expect to be treated. He compares this natural apprehension of a moral principle to the depth perception humans have thanks to the evolution of stereo vision. Not all species (not even all two-eyed species) have stereo vision, Mr. Pinker says, but any species that has it is picking up on "real facts about the universe" that were true even before that species evolved – namely, the three-dimensional nature of reality and laws of optics.

Similarly, certain intuitions about reciprocal moral obligation are picking up on real facts about the logic of discourse and about generic social dynamics – on principles that were true even before humans came along and illustrated them. Including, in particular, the non-zero-sum dynamics that are part of our universe.

As Mr. Pinker once put it in conversation with me: "There may be a sense in which some moral statements aren't just ... artifacts of a particular brain wiring but are part of the reality of the universe, even if you can't touch them and weigh them." Comparing these moral truths to mathematical truths, he said that perhaps "they're

really true independent of our existence. I mean, they're out there and in some sense - it's very difficult to grasp - but we discover them, we don't hallucinate them."

(Ed: Mr. Wright's best-selling new book, *The Evolution of God*, will be a SHSNY Book Club choice when – we hope soon – it becomes available in paperback.)

SKY CAKE

Patton Oswalt

(This is the comedian's routine on the origins of religion, and I've cleaned up his language a bit. For the original, go to YouTube and enter Patton Oswalt + Sky Cake. – JR)

I'm an atheist and I love religion. I don't love religion in a snarky, mean-spirited way. I unabashedly, sincerely love that we have religion, because if we didn't we wouldn't be here being all postmodern and ironic. There'd be no civilization ... because at the dawn of man, civilization was just The Biggest In Charge, and that's as far as we were going to go. Whoever was the biggest raped, killed, ate whatever they wanted, that was it. Civilization was a huge psychopath with a club, going, "I'm gonna have rape for dinner." That was it, that's as far as we were going to go.

And then one of my ancestors, some weakling, said, "Look, there's no way I can beat that guy, but what if I trick him into thinking that if he doesn't kill and rape people while he's down here, that when he dies, there's a magic city in the clouds and that he can go up there and have all the cake he wants?"

Now that's not a very well-thought-out plan, but he went and told the big psycho, and the psycho heard that and said, "Yeah, I like cake."

Boom! That was the beginning of civilization. Now we can work on fire and writing and agriculture. That's religion – it's the old Sky Cake dodge – it works.

Things were great for a while, but that stuff was going on all over the planet – they just used different desserts in different places: Sky Cookies or Sky Pie or Sky Baklava. Then, as each of these civilizations grew, they built ships and they'd visit each other. And one guy would walk off the boat and say, "Hey, did you hear the good news about Sky Baklava?" And the first people went, "It's cake, you freak, and you're dead!"

And so there were Dessert Wars – it was a nightmare. It got so bad that every now and then some dude would show up and say, "Hey, we got good news. There's cake and pie and cookies for everyone, and we can all share." And people said, "Nail him to a f***ing cross – it's only Cake! The only way God's Cake tastes good is if, up in the Sky, the Sky Cookie and Sky Pie people can't have Sky Cake.

"I did not spend my life not raping and killing people to not go up in the Sky and have Cake. Sky Cake!"

AMERICA'S BEST-KNOWN "BORN AGAIN" THINKS AGAIN Jimmy Carter

(Excerpted from "The words of God do not justify cruelty to women" in The Guardian (UK), 7/12/2009)

I have been a Christian all my life and a deacon and Bible teacher for many years. My faith is a source of strength and comfort to me, as religious beliefs are to hundreds of millions of people around the world.

So my decision to sever my ties with the Southern Baptist Convention, after six decades, was painful and difficult. It was, however, an unavoidable decision when the convention's leaders, quoting a few carefully selected Bible verses and claiming that Eve was created second to Adam and was responsible for original sin, ordained that women must be "subservient" to their husbands and prohibited from serving as deacons, pastors or chaplains in the military service. This was in conflict with my belief—confirmed in the holy scriptures—that we are all equal in the eyes of God.

This view that women are somehow inferior to men is not restricted to one religion or belief. Women are prevented from playing a full and equal role in many faiths. ... The belief that women must be subjugated to the wishes of men excuses slavery, violence, forced prostitution, genital mutilation and laws that omit rape as a crime. But it also costs many millions of girls and women control over their own bodies and lives, and continues to deny them fair access to education, health, employment and influence within their own communities.

The impact of these religious beliefs touches every aspect of our lives. They help explain why in many countries boys are educated before girls; why girls are told when and whom they must marry; and why many face enormous and unacceptable risks in pregnancy and childbirth because their basic health needs are not met.

In some Islamic nations, women are restricted in their movements, punished for permitting the exposure of an arm or ankle, deprived of education, prohibited from driving a car or competing with men for a job. If a woman is raped, she is often most severely punished as the guilty party in the crime.

The same discriminatory thinking lies behind the continuing gender gap in pay and why there are still so few women in office in Britain and the United States. The root of this prejudice lies deep in our histories, but its impact is felt every day. It is not women and girls alone who suffer. It damages all of us. The evidence shows that investing in women and girls delivers major benefits for everyone in society. An educated woman has healthier children, is more likely to send them to school. She earns more and invests what she earns in her family.

It is simply self-defeating for any community to dis-

criminate against half its population. We need to challenge these self-serving and outdated attitudes and practices ...

I understand, however, why many political leaders can be reluctant about stepping into this minefield. Religion, and tradition, are powerful and sensitive areas to challenge. ... The truth is that male religious leaders have had—and still have—an option to interpret holy teachings either to exalt or subjugate women. They have, for selfish ends, overwhelmingly chosen the latter.

Their continuing choice provides the justification for much of the pervasive persecution and abuse of women throughout the world. This is in clear violation of ... the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul, Moses and the prophets, Muhammad, and founders of other great religions – all of whom have called for proper and equitable treatment of all the children of God. It is time we had the courage to challenge these views.

A RESPECTFUL DISAGREEMENT

John Rafferty

An excellent apologia (above) by our 39th president, all but that last paragraph. Our best-known re-born Christian can't face the fact that it's not just hide-bound fundamentalists who subjugate women, but the very precepts of all "the world's great religions."

I'm not a scholar of religion, but am reasonably well-read, and I'm unaware of any "call for proper and equitable treatment" of women by any of the "founders."

Moses? He's the putative author of the Pentateuch, the source of those "selected Bible verses" that condemn Eve and so many women, justifying their subjugation, and assuming their status as men's chattels.

Jesus? In the gospels, when Jesus speaks to women he does so curtly, most famously when the young man snottily dismisses his mother with the too-busy-for-you comment that he must "be about my father's business."

Mohammed? I know little, but I've never heard of an "equal rights" statement in the Quran or among the hadiths – and the man married a nine-year-old!

And Paul? President Carter, you have to be kidding. I know new scholarship indicates that women probably did teach and lead in the (very) early church, but Paul's view of women as necessary evils (men would do "better to marry than to burn") became the Christian dogma the Southern Baptist Convention still pig-headedly adheres to, and is summarized in Paul's own (in)famous words:

Let the women keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is a disgrace for a woman to speak in church.

– 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35

OUR THREE MAJOR WESTERN RELIGIONS IN LOVE-THY-NEIGHBOR MODE

1. CATHOLIC

The Pope says atheists are responsible for global warming and the destruction of the environment. In a speech at the Vatican August 26, he said: "Is it not true that inconsiderate use of creation begins where God is marginalized or also where his existence is denied? If the human creature's relationship with the Creator weakens, matter is reduced to egoistic possession, man becomes the 'final authority,' and the objective of existence is reduced to a feverish race to possess the most possible."

"Rich," comments Terry Sanderson of the National Secular Society (UK). "As he sits in his golden palaces, surrounded by unimaginable luxury and wealth, he lectures the rest of us about restraint and greed."

2. PROTESTANT

Pastor Steven Anderson of Faithful Word Baptist Church in Tempe, AZ, delivered a sermon on August 16 titled "Why I Hate Barack Obama," and another a couple of weeks later when he asked his parishioners to join him in praying: "I hope God strikes Barack Obama with brain cancer so he can die like Ted Kennedy and I hope it happens today." (A day after that first sermon, a member of his church showed up at an Obama appearance in Phoenix with an AR-15 semi-automatic assault rifle.)

Pastor Anderson—previously better known locally for calling for the imposition of biblical law and saying that if he "were king" he would decree the execution of homosexuals and children who curse their parents—in yet another sermon called on God to "melt" the president like a "salted snail."

3. JEWISH

The Israeli government has launched a television and Internet advertising campaign with a 30-second spot urging Israelis to inform on Jewish friends and relatives abroad who may be in danger of marrying non-Jews. (Ed: That's their word – "inform.")

The \$800,000 ad campaign is directed particularly at Jews in the United States and Canada, whose combined total of 5.7 million constitutes the world's largest Jewish population (there are 5.6 million in Israel). Most belong to the liberal Reform stream of Judaism that, unlike Orthodoxy, does not oppose intermarriage.

According to the campaign's organizers, more than 200 Israelis rang a hot line to report names of Jews living abroad during the week after the first TV advertisement was run, leaving details of e-mail addresses and Facebook and Twitter accounts of those "in danger."

Little kid: Grandpa, what's Heck?

Grandpa: Heck is where people go who don't believe in Gosh.

TOOTH FAIRY SCIENCE AND FAIRY TALE SCIENCE

Skeptics Dictionary

(From <http://www.skepdic.com/toothfairyscience.html>)

"Before we try to explain something, we should be sure it actually happened." – Ray Hyman

Tooth Fairy science is an expression coined by Harriet Hall, M.D. (aka the SkepDoc), to refer to doing research on a phenomenon before establishing that the phenomenon exists. Tooth Fairy science is part of a larger domain that might be called Fairy Tale science: research that aims to confirm a farfetched story believed by millions of scientifically innocent minds. Fairy Tale science uses research data to explain things that haven't been proven to have actually happened. Fairy Tale scientists think that if they have collected data that is consistent with their hypothesis, then they have collected data that confirms their hypothesis. Tooth Fairy science seeks explanations for things before establishing that those things actually exist. For example:

You could measure how much money the Tooth Fairy leaves under the pillow, whether she leaves more cash for the first or last tooth, whether the payoff is greater if you leave the tooth in a plastic baggie versus wrapped in Kleenex. You can get all kinds of good data that is reproducible and statistically significant. Yes, you have learned something. But you haven't learned what you think you've learned, because you haven't bothered to establish whether the Tooth Fairy really exists.

Furthermore, there may be a simpler, more plausible explanation for your data. (Most readers will not find it arduous to devise an explanation for those gifts that have replaced teeth that were placed under a pillow.)

Most people love stories about magical beings who can fly, produce material goods out of nothing, heal the sick, raise the dead, or seemingly recall a past life. Ian Stevenson, a psychiatrist and head of the department of psychiatry at the University of Virginia, spent years collecting stories from people who claimed to be reincarnated. His data is extensive and he used it to make a case for present-life calamities in terms of past-life experiences. Stevenson exemplifies the circular reasoning of many Fairy Tale scientists: he used his data to support a belief in the reality of reincarnation and he used reincarnation to explain his data. ...

Classic examples of Tooth Fairy science abound in Complementary/Alternative Medicine and psi studies, where the existence of such things as chi, meridians, and transfer of information are assumed. Studies explain how health is restored by moving vital energy along meridians and unblocking chi, or how selecting one picture out of four at greater than chance odds demonstrates telepathy. A grocer claims to have cured a jani-

tor's deafness by manipulating his spine and chiropractic is born, but was the man really deaf to begin with? Data is collected and many studies are done to show how spinal manipulation by affecting vital energy cures not only deafness but many other things as well. A healer claims to have cured cancer by chanting and consulting a great crow in the Himalayas, but did the patient really have cancer to begin with? Studies are done and statistically significant results are achieved that show chanting and crow consultation work better than chance.

When the studies show that prayer doesn't heal or that applied kinesiology or dowsing doesn't work under controlled conditions, do their advocates reject a belief in spirits or energies? No. They know their fairies exist. That's their story and they're sticking to it no matter what the evidence. They have tons of anecdotal evidence that outweighs any scientific studies that don't confirm their beliefs. Tooth Fairy science is a magnet for those who believe that the plural of anecdote is scientific data.

DOONESBURY DISSES "REASONISTS"

(From the Doonesbury syndicated cartoon strip, 9/6/09)

("NPR Radio Talk Show" host Mark Slackmeyer is on air in his studio, interviewing a guest.)

Mark: We're still talking to conspiratologist Page Griffin about American gullibility.

Griffin: It's quite remarkable, Mark. Americans believe in many things that can't be verified. For instance, almost half of us believe in ghosts, and 40 percent believe in alien abductions. And that availability to alternative reality is reflected in conspiracy theory. From Truthism, which holds that Bush was behind 9/11, to Birthism.

Of course, we still have legacy fringe groups like the JFK Grassy Knollers, the Staged Moon Landingists, etc.

Mark: Professor, is there any counter to these powerful theorists?

Griffin: Not really, Mark, only the Reasonists.

Mark: "Reasonists"?

Griffin: They believe in an evidence-based world, something called Rationalism. But it's a tiny group, not so influential.

15 ANSWERS TO CREATIONIST NONSENSE

John Rennie – Part 12

(The "15 Answers," from ScientificAmerican.com in 2002, have been appearing occasionally in PIQUE.)

12. Nobody has ever seen a new species evolve.

Speciation is probably fairly rare and in many cases might take centuries. Furthermore, recognizing a new species during a formative stage can be difficult, because biologists sometimes disagree about how best to define a species. The most widely used definition, Mayr's Biological Species Concept, recognizes a species as a distinct

community of reproductively isolated populations – sets of organisms that normally do not or cannot breed outside their community. In practice, this standard can be difficult to apply to organisms isolated by distance or terrain or to plants (and, of course, fossils do not breed). Biologists therefore usually use organisms' physical and behavioral traits as clues to their species membership.

Nevertheless, the scientific literature does contain reports of apparent speciation events in plants, insects and worms. In most of these experiments, researchers subjected organisms to various types of selection—for anatomical differences, mating behaviors, habitat preferences and other traits—and found that they had created populations of organisms that did not breed with outsiders. For example, William R. Rice of the University of New Mexico and George W. Salt of the University of California at Davis demonstrated that if they sorted a group of fruit flies by their preference for certain environments and bred those flies separately over 35 generations, the resulting flies would refuse to breed with those from a very different environment.

WHO WALKS BOWSER WHILE YOU'RE IN HEAVEN?

Tara Lohan

(Excerpted from "Atheist Group Offers to Take Care of Christians' Pets After the Rapture" on AlterNet, 9/2/09)

Here's the premise: "You've committed your life to Jesus. You know you're saved. But when the Rapture comes what's to become of your loving pets left behind? Eternal Earthbound Pets takes that burden off your mind." From their website:

Our service is plain and simple; our fee structure reasonable. For \$110 we guarantee that should the Rapture occur within ten (10) years of receipt of payment, one pet per residence will be saved. Each additional pet at your residence will be saved for an additional \$15.00 fee. A small price to pay for the health and safety of your four-legged friends.

This sounds fantastic — after all, when the Rapture comes, there are probably going to be a lot of things on your mind. Really, what does one even pack? So it's nice to get arrangements for your pets, who apparently will spend eternity with the atheists and the gays and the gay atheists, all sorted out beforehand.

GOD'S GAME PLAN

(Forwarded by David Rafferty)

I'm going to create man and woman with original sin. Then I'm going to impregnate a woman with myself as her child, so that I can be born. Once alive, I will kill myself as a sacrifice to myself. To save you from the sin I originally condemned you to. Ta-da!

**ONLY 3% OF OKLAHOMA H.S. STUDENTS
WOULD PASS THE U.S. CITIZENSHIP TEST**

(Forwarded by Bill Mitchell)

Fewer than one in four Oklahoma public high school students can name the first president of the United States, according to a survey commissioned by the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs in observance of Constitution Day September 17.

A thousand students were given 10 questions from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services item bank. Candidates for U.S. citizenship must answer six questions correctly in order to become citizens.

- Question — % of Students Answering Correctly
- What is the supreme law of the land? —28%
- What do we call the first ten amendments to the Constitution? —26%
- What are the two parts of the U.S. Congress? —27%
- How many justices are on the Supreme Court? —10%
- Who wrote the Declaration of Independence? —14%
- What ocean is on the east coast of the U.S.? —61%
- What are the two major U.S. political parties? —43%
- We elect a U.S. senator for how many years? —11%
- Who was the first President of the United States? —23%
- Who is in charge of the executive branch? —29%

About 92 percent of immigrants who take the citizenship test pass on their first try. But only about 3 percent of the Oklahoma high school students surveyed would have passed.

Comment: Don't smirk. I wonder what percentage of New York-area students would qualify as citizens. — JR

DUMB ...

A British Jewish couple is suing their neighbors in a block of flats in Dorset, saying they're being kept "prisoners" in their home.

They are "imprisoned" because if they try to leave their flat on the Sabbath they automatically trigger the light in the community hallway, contravening the religious ban on turning on electrical items – which constitutes "making fire," according to some Stone Age book.

... AND FATALLY DUMBER

Gunther Link, a devout Austrian Catholic, was trapped in a stuck elevator in Vienna last month. Frightened, he prayed for release, and when he got it, went immediately to the Weinhaus Church to thank God. On his knees, he wrapped his arms around one of the stone pillars on which was perched the church's 860-pound stone altar – which fell and crushed him.

SHSNY WEBSITE – NEW & IMPROVED!

Every issue of PIQUE from January, 2002, to April, 2009, is now up on the site—www.shsny.org—and available to read and/or download. Formatting is much improved starting with the January, 2005 issue, and new issues will shortly be posted in pdf format, looking just like printed PIQUE, pictures and all.

**Freethought Day Lunch
with
Jennifer Michael Hecht
Sunday, October 18.
Calendar (Yellow) Pages**

**In defense of
"Penn & Teller: Bulls**t"
Page 3**

**Look who's talking –
to each other!
Page 1**

**Secular Humanist
Society of New York
F.D.R. Station,
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ANSHS

