

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

September, 2009

We're back, and able to report that while we were on vacation, irrationality and idiocy were not. Herein we wonder whether our brains are hard-wired, introduce a new-to-these-pages philosopher, celebrate a life well-lived, visit a cathedral and re-visit the East Ramapo school district (last time!).

We consider Christians who mass-murder and those simply bad-mannered, then offer two more Dumbth nominees and two more candidates for Hell. But first, we begin with a new Beginning.— JR

GENESIS REVISITED: A SCIENTIFIC CREATION STORY

Michael Shermer

(Originally published in Darwin: A Norton Critical Edition, edited by SHSNY's own Philip Appleman, 2001.)

To the Citizens of Kansas (along with those from Ohio, Georgia, Michigan, and a dozen other states contemplating the teaching of "Intelligent Design" creationism as a "balance" to the theory of evolution in public school science classes), I present you with a small literary sampling of how the opening chapters of Genesis will have to be revised to accommodate modern scientific theories and data. I call it Genesis Revisited.

In the beginning — specifically on October 23, 4004 B.C., at noon — out of quantum foam fluctuation God created the Big Bang. The bang was followed by cosmological inflation. God saw that the Big Bang was very big, too big for creatures that could worship him, so He created the earth. And darkness was upon the face of the deep, so He commanded hydrogen atoms (which He created out of Quarks and other subatomic goodies) to fuse and become helium atoms and in the process release energy in the form of light. And the light maker he called the sun, and the process He called fusion. And He saw the light was good because now He could see what he was doing. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

And God said, Let there be lots of fusion light makers in the sky. Some of these fusion makers appear to be more than 4,004 light years from Earth. In fact, some of the fusion makers He grouped into collections He called

galaxies, and these appeared to be millions and even billions of light years from Earth, so He created "tired light" —light that slows down through space—so that the 4004 B.C. creation myth might be preserved. And created He many wondrous splendors, including Red Giants, White Dwarfs, Quasars, Pulsars, Nova and Supernova, Worm Holes, and even Black Holes out of which nothing can escape. But since God cannot be constrained by nothing (can God make a planet so big that he could not lift it?), He created Hawking radiation through which information can escape from Black Holes. This made God even more tired than tired light, and the evening and the morning were the second day.

And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place, and let the continents drift apart by plate tectonics. He decreed sea floor spreading would create zones of emergence, and He caused subduction zones to build mountains and cause earthquakes. In weak points in the crust God created volcanic islands, where the next day He would place organisms that were similar to but different from their relatives on the continents, so that still later created creatures called humans would mistake them for evolved descendants. And in the land God placed fossil fuels, natural gas, and other natural resources for humans to exploit, but not until after Day Six. And the evening and the morning were the third day.

And God saw that the land was lonely, so He created animals bearing their own kind, declaring Thou shalt not evolve into new species, and thy equilibrium shall not be punctuated. And God placed into the land's stra-

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JANET McCLOSKEY ROBBINS STRAUSS
1925 - 2008

Sunday morning, July 5, Donna and I sat in the Community Congregational Church of East Brookfield, Vermont, with fifty or more of Janet Strauss' family and friends to celebrate a life well lived. We had spent the holiday weekend with the MacDonalds, Hacketts, Strausses and Others, the extended family of in-laws that Donna could not give up—and who would not let her go—after she and her first husband divorced.

That family gathered around matriarch Janet at her small farmhouse, Meadowbrook, as did we for a week or ten days each of the last eight summers. Like them, we became involved in her enthusiasms: local Democratic politics, the Vermont Historical Society, regional theater in nearby Randolph. Most notably for readers of these pages, Janet was not only a member and generous supporter of the Congregational church in which we sat that Sunday, but also of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. What's more, a few other members and subscribers in the pews that morning got their introduction to SHSNY through gift subscriptions from Janet.

Janet deserved bright sunshine for her memorial service and she got it, streaming through the Gothic-frame windows of the classically New England white wood-frame church. As an atheist, I'd been wary of the service, but from the moment the ladies of the church greeted us in the anteroom with coffee and home-baked goodies, I felt comfortable. Light filled the white interior, devoid of decoration except for a simple cross (and, jarringly, one of those dreamy pictures of a softly-coiffed, Waspy-looking Jesus), and when Donna and I settled in our pew along with SHSNY'er Jane Bertoni, I checked the hymnal to see what we'd be expected to sing.

"America the Beautiful"? I can do that.

The pastor was low-key, greeted us companionably, and joked easily with members of the family, including non-theist Steve Doherty, Janet's nephew (and Donna's ex), who read a Bible passage, and Janet's Jewish stepson Peter Strauss, who led the eulogies.

As I sat there, I couldn't help comparing the experience—simplicity, ease, tolerance and welcoming warmth—with the rigid, authoritarian, intolerant Roman Catholic religion of the 1940s in which I grew up. And couldn't help wondering what kind of man Congregationalist East Brookfield, rather than Catholic New York City, might have made of me.

I thought, too, of a scene Donna, Jane and I had



ta, fossils that appeared older than 4004 B.C. And the sequence resembled descent with modification. And the evening and morning were the fourth day.

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the creatures that hath life, the fishes. And God created great whales whose skeletal structure and physiology were homologous with the land mammals he would create later that day. Since this caused confusion in the valley of the shadow of doubt God brought forth abundantly all creatures, great and small, declaring that microevolution was permitted, but not macroevolution. And God said, "Natura non facit saltum" — Nature shall not make leaps. And the evening and morning were the fifth day.

And God created the pongidids and hominids with 98 percent genetic similarity, naming two of them Adam and Eve, who were anatomically fully modern humans. In the book in which God explained how He did all this, in chapter one He said he created Adam and Eve together out of the dust at the same time, but in chapter two He said He created Adam first, then later created Eve out of one of Adam's ribs. This caused further confusion in the valley of the shadow of doubt, so God created Bible scholars and theologians to argue the point.

And in the ground placed He in abundance teeth, jaws, skulls, and pelvises of transitional fossils from pre-Adamite creatures. One he chose as his special creation He named Lucy. And God realized this was confusing, so he created paleoanthropologists to sort it out. And just as He was finishing up the loose ends of the creation God realized that Adam's immediate descendants who lived as farmers and herders would not understand inflationary cosmology, global general relativity, quantum mechanics, astrophysics, biochemistry, paleontology, population genetics, and evolutionary theory, so He created creation myths. But there were so many creation stories throughout the land that God realized this too was confusing, so he created anthropologists, folklorists, and mythologists to settle the issue.

By now the valley of the shadow of doubt was overrun with skepticism, so God became angry, so angry that God lost His temper and cursed the first humans, telling them to go forth and multiply (but not in those words). They took God literally and 6,000 years later there are six billion humans. And the evening and morning were the sixth day.

By now God was tired, so God said, "Thank me its Friday," and He made the weekend. It was a good idea.

Is there an intelligent man or woman now in the world who believes in the Garden of Eden story? If you find any man who believes it, strike his forehead and you will hear an echo. Something is for rent.

— Robert Green Ingersoll, *Orthodoxy* (1884)

heard about over coffee but had missed the night before (too much driving in driving rain), after a performance of "The King and I" at the theater in Randolph that Janet had supported. The house lights came up and the show's two directors spoke of her generosity, then recited the first two lines of "Great Agnostic" Robert Green Ingersoll's "grace" that Janet had made her family's holiday-dinner grace, not prayer, and that she had taught to so many people (including my own boys years ago) ...

The time to be happy is now.

The place to be happy is here.

... and the play's childrens chorus shouted the last line:

The way to be happy is to make others happy.

Not a bad sendoff.

Bye, Janet. You made a lot of us happy.

— John Rafferty

CONFESSIONS OF A HUMANIST ON VISITING WASHINGTON NATIONAL CATHEDRAL

Giles Kelly

People have many reasons to visit this magnificent cathedral on high ground overlooking the nation's capital and the Potomac River: To consider the architecture, to marvel at the stained glass windows, and feel the warmth of the heated floors. People go for the music, to attend a service or a lecture, and to pray. Or perhaps just to enjoy the views from on high, or to explore the spaces inside, or just to rest and contemplate. People go there by the thousands for such reasons.

As a card-carrying humanist I too am drawn to the cathedral, not of course by the religious rituals, though I like the theatrics, the processions and the rich robes, but I have gone at a quiet time for the spiritual ambiance.

Inside that cathedral's stunning stone nave I have felt in harmony with all things great and glorious. It is a place where I have contemplated what I don't understand. It is where I have been reminded of the miracle of my being. Where I have felt pangs of love and loneliness for times and persons I once enjoyed. There I have been reminded of the love and beauty in life that I have known. It is there too that I have felt so very thankful, but to whom, to whom?

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

David Brooks

(Reprinted from his Op-Ed column, "Human Nature Today," in The New York Times, June 26, 2009)

Has there ever been a time when there were so many different views of human nature floating around all at once? The economists have their view, in which rational people coolly chase incentives. Traditional Christians have their view, emphasizing original sin, grace and the pilgrim's progress in a fallen

world. And then there are the evolutionary psychologists, who get the most media attention.

For 99 percent of human history, they observe, our species lived in small hunter-gatherer bands. The people who survived developed certain mental modules, which have been passed down to us through our genes. Some of these traits serve us well in the modern age. Children have the capacity to learn language with astonishing speed. Some of these traits don't. Humans have an insatiable craving for fatty and sugary foods.

In 2000, Geoffrey Miller, a leading evolutionary psychologist, published a book called *The Mating Mind*, in which he argued that the process of sexual selection among early human groups hardwired many of the behaviors we see in humans today. Some of the traits are physical. Men generally prefer women with a 0.7 waist-to-hip ratio (that's a 24-inch waist and 36-inch hips, for those of you reading this at the gym). Women generally prefer men who are taller and slightly older.

Some of these traits are more subtle. Men, Miller argues, tip better in restaurants, because they're programmed to show how much surplus wealth they have. The average American adult knows 60,000 words, far more than we need. We have all those words because we like to mate with people who caress us with language.

Now Miller has published another book, *Spent*, in which he takes evolutionary psychology to the mall. The basic argument is that each of us is born with our own individual level of six big traits: intelligence, openness to new things, conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability and extraversion. These modules are built into humans and other animals (apparently squid can be shy).

We are all narcissists, Miller asserts. We spend much of our lives trying to broadcast our excellence in these traits in order to attract mates. Even if we're not naturally smart or outgoing, we buy products and brands that give the impression we are.

According to Miller, driving an Acura, Infiniti, Subaru or Volkswagen is a sign of high intelligence. Driving a Cadillac, Chrysler, Ford or Hummer is a sign of low intelligence. Listening to Bjork is a sign of high intelligence, while listening to Lynyrd Skynyrd is a sign of low intelligence. Watching Quentin Tarantino movies is a sign of high openness. He theorizes that teenage girls may cut themselves as a way to demonstrate their ability to withstand infections.

Evolutionary psychology has had a good run. But now there is growing pushback. Sharon Begley has a rollicking, if slightly overdrawn, takedown in the current *Newsweek*. And *Spent* is a sign that the theory is being used to try to explain more than it can bear.

The first problem is that far from being prepro-

grammed with a series of hardwired mental modules, as the E.P. types assert, our brains are fluid and plastic. We're learning that evolution can be a more rapid process than we thought. It doesn't take hundreds of thousands of years to produce genetic alterations.

Moreover, we've evolved to adapt to diverse environments. Different circumstances can selectively activate different genetic potentials. Individual behavior can vary wildly from one context to another. An arrogant bully on the playground may be meek in math class. People have kaleidoscopic thinking styles and use different cognitive strategies to solve the same sorts of problems.

Evolutionary psychology leaves the impression that human nature was carved a hundred thousand years ago, and then history sort of stopped.

But human nature adapts to the continual flow of information, adjusting to the ancient information contained in genes and the current information contained in today's news in a continuous, idiosyncratic blend.

The second problem is one evolutionary psychology shares with economics. It's too individualistic: individuals are born with certain traits, which they seek to maximize in the struggle for survival.

But individuals aren't formed before they enter society. Individuals are created by social interaction. Our identities are formed by the particular rhythms of maternal attunement, by the shared webs of ideas, symbols and actions that vibrate through us second by second. Shopping isn't merely a way to broadcast permanent, inborn traits. For some people, it's also an activity of trying things on in the never-ending process of creating and discovering who they are.

The allure of evolutionary psychology is that it organizes all behavior into one eternal theory, impervious to the serendipity of time and place. But there's no escaping context. That's worth remembering next time somebody tells you we are hardwired to do this or that.

MOSES EXPLAINS APOPHATIC THEOLOGY TO JESUS AND MO

(From www.jesusandmo.net, 7/7/2009)

Moses: You guys are going about your apologetics all wrong. Try apophatic theology – it's unassailable.

Mohammed: What is it?

Moses: No positive claims can be made about the ineffable god, so the truest expression of faith is silence.

(Silence)

(More silence)

(Even more silence)

Jesus: Wait, that means we can't tell people how to behave.

Mohammed: Got any other bright ideas, Moses?

MORE ON "SECULARISM vs. DEMOCRACY"

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

In short: Do secular values, like free public education, trump majority rule? Or should the democratic electoral process, under law, be inviolate? The questions elicited eight reasoned essays in July PIQUE, and three more (that's it!) here. — JR

Stanley Friedland

As usual, you delineate the main polarities of this dilemma quite clearly. But, I believe the answer is rather clear. As Paul Krugman firmly states in *The NYTimes*, ours "is a nation of laws." We are governed by the rule of law. If we don't like the unintended results of that law, we have two choices: we can actively work to change the objectionable law, or, we can actively work within that law to make it work better for us. How did the Jewish minority of Monsey become the majority on the East Ramapo school district? They campaigned and voted as a solid bloc within the school election laws to win their seats on the school board. Now, the other good citizens of the district, disturbed over what has happened, must do the same. They must organize; run attractive candidates and win back a majority of school board seats. That is called the democratic process.

Let's draw a parallel example. Those of us who were "sane and sensible" were horrified to see George W. Bush re-elected in 2004. After four disastrous years, how could anyone of sound mind vote for his re-election, even when John Kerry ran a flawed campaign? Much to our consternation, we were treated to four more years of even more destructive leadership. Comes 2008, we were ready (especially the younger ones) to actively seek change, and we succeeded. That's democracy in action. We "revolt" through the use of our laws to create needed change. To do otherwise is to advocate the "selective" use of our laws, which then can easily be turned against us down the road. That simply doesn't work.

One last point: the title of your article, "Secularism vs. Democracy" is erroneous. Secularism is rarely, if ever, counter to democracy.* Secularism is made possible by a truly democratic, multi-cultural and tolerant society. Hasn't that already been the case as we witness the increasing secularization of our population and the increasing popularity of secular books and authors?

If I were to write a scenario for what I'd like to see happen in East Ramapo, it would center on a dynamic, well qualified secularist (probably a respected educator) who would run for a school board seat, citing the need for his qualifications and perspective that would be most effective in meeting the needs of that school district. In other words, democracy (the rule of law) would be the vehicle to alleviate this particular situation, and the advancement of secularism via the election of a known secularist would be a welcome by-product. I don't see this as far-fetched; I believe such an election of a proclaimed secularist will happen in the near future, especially as our population becomes more and more "emancipated" from the rigid shackles of organized religion. P.S.: PIQUE is a great newsletter; strong kudos for its enjoyable stimulus of our brain cells.

* Irony, Stan (and a couple of other readers), irony! — JR

Wayne Whitmore

If it's not too late to get my libertarian two cents in, I think Sim Storch [who in July PIQUE argued that having no children he shouldn't pay for schools - Ed.] is right to be outraged, but not because democracy is not working – precisely the opposite. Taxing people to pay for the education of someone else is aggression against the individual paying the taxes, whether he has children or not. And like many statist programs that were and are sold to the public by power hungry politicians pandering for votes, everyone is led to believe they will get something for nothing (or at someone else's expense).

As with any true democracy (which we are emphatically not), the mob will eventually rule over the minority. In fact, many people will get something much less, while having to pay more – and losing the right to their own property through taxation. So it goes with more and more government intervention and programs today.

It may be hard for people now to fathom how "private" education would work, because government usurped this role from private hands long ago, but it did work for a long time in this country, and it arguably worked just as well without making people pay for it at the point of a gun.

I could go on, and will if you are continuing this dialog. But then I would agree with Barbara Lifton that the reason for beginning this discussion in PIQUE was peripheral to its mission (Ramapo's board decision was not an attack on secularists per se), and that discussing public education in this forum is inappropriate as well.

Arthur Harris

I disagree with Barbara Lifton's view of the situation [in July PIQUE]. The East Ramapo school board is not forcing religious beliefs on the general population. Last time

I passed through Monsey, I didn't see any Hispanic kids wearing sidecurls. What the Monsey-dominated board is doing is gutting the public school system by starving it.

Simply because a democratic election was held doesn't make it pure. Hitler was elected by a large plurality in a fair election. Stacking the deck still winds up with an unfair game.

In some districts nationwide, the school boards are packed by the religious who promote the teaching of Creationism or, in the case of Ramapo, cut school taxes to ease the burden on those that send their kids to parochial school. It may be correct but it ain't right. We must convince Congress and state legislatures to pass laws to distribute education money as evenly as possible.

John Rafferty was on target [arguing against] Sim Storch. Why pay for things we don't use? Why have a navy? When was the last time you sailed on a U.S. Navy ship? (For me it was more than 60 years ago; the Queen Elizabeth II was much better.)

But John, the folks in Monsey, that enclave of fundamentalism, are not "pig ignorant." That's tref (not kosher). But they are ignorant as bird turds.

GOOD CHRISTIANS, BAD MANNERS

An Anonymous Alcoholic Atheist

We still have a long way to go to overcome the deep-seated resentment, and sometimes even hatred against atheists in our country—even in Alcoholics Anonymous, which strives for fellowship.

"God is what runs AA!" screamed a newcomer during a recent Agnostic AA meeting, interrupting the speaker. Talking out-of-turn and cross-talking are strictly against the rules at any meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. And this wasn't your ordinary AA meeting that might normally have a Christian bias.

Let me preface. Around 25 years ago, a far-sighted New Yorker, the late John Y, a treasured member of both New York Atheists and AA, felt that the latter was losing needy alcoholics who were turned off by the emphasis on Christianity. He began, with AA's official blessing, what has turned into seven meetings in New York City. They are "agnostic" meetings because AA doesn't allow the use of the word "atheist" (or "Christian" either, for that matter) in meeting listings. The code words in the meeting book for non-believers are "No prayers."

The meetings are growing in size today and serve as a model for new ones starting up both here and abroad. That's the good news. The bad news is exemplified by what happened at that recent meeting.

The visitor, let's call him "Joe," who was wearing a cross around his neck, was re-starting AA after a relapse. At the beginning of the meeting in his round-robin turn to share, he passionately related that now that he was

back in the Program, he had turned to God, obeying his higher power and religiously following the 12 Steps.

This is hard for us atheists to listen to because we don't usually do the Steps, but we know which ones are really religious. But since we foster "free expression" as stated in all our printed introductions, all are welcome to say whatever they choose, although it is requested that comments be limited to drinking issues.

But Joe's comments set off a response and several regulars felt they had to politely say how they felt about the prevailing notion in traditional AA that belief in a higher power is necessary to achieve sobriety. Agnostic AA-goers know this is not true; we appear to have the same rate of recovery and failure as the believers.

But that didn't stop Joe. By the end of the meeting he was shouting a lot of four-letter words (some of them compound) regarding what he thought of us and, after some heated exchanges with the meeting leader and others, Joe ran out, raced down the long corridor of our host hospital and in admirable voice, screamed "Fuck you!" to a lot of astounded strangers standing in the hall.

Let me say that one great goal of AA is for its members to try to attain serenity and that Saturday morning it was pretty well shattered. It has been my own experience after ten years in the Fellowship that AA is a shining example of humanism (and democracy) at work. It works because of the honesty and collaboration of our fellows rather than a paternal figure at the helm. I've never met Jesus at a meeting but I've met plenty of exceptional human beings. And a few bad Christians among a lot of nice ones.

It has also been my experience that when these dogmatic Christians wander into our meetings they are often rude, lecture us on our heathen ways, or stalk out. Should we atheists speak at their traditional meetings about having gotten sober without a higher power, we are often greeted with disdain. But, inevitably, several people will come up to us afterward and say, "You know, I feel the same way you do. Thanks for speaking."

Although we have a long way to go toward obtaining tolerance for non-belief, it is good to know that there are official agnostic AA meetings. And one of the major large traditional meetings in the city has just eliminated the use of The Lord's Prayer from their closing. Agnostic AA meetings all end with the slogan, "Live and Let Live." Anyone can find out more about our meetings at www.agnosticAAnc.org.

In our country are zealots of many different ... religious persuasions whose fanatical conviction is that all thought is divinely classified into two kinds: that which is their own, and that which is false and dangerous. — Robert Jackson, Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court

THE CURSE OF RELIGION

A. C. Grayling

(Reprinted from www.guardian.co.uk, July 1, 2009)

News that the archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols and the chief rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, have joined forces in a campaign to prolong the sufferings of those incurably or terminally ill—by opposing a change in the law that would decriminalize those who accompany anyone who goes to Switzerland in search of help to die—comes as no surprise. A preference for dogma over kindness, for superstition-based moralism over humaneness, is standard fare for religion, as history too loudly attests.

Nevertheless it obliges one, wearily and with distaste, to return to the question of religion in the public domain. One would of course like to see humankind wake up from the sleep of reason that enables religious beliefs and the institutions built on them to persist. One would like a remark like Sir Harry Kroto's "the only mistake Bernie Madoff made was to promise returns in this life" to startle everyone into a great shout of laughter that would strip away the pretensions of religion and lay bare its absurdity and poverty. But while the man-made curse of religion exists, the question of what archbishops and rabbis do in the way of trying to subvert the ethical maturation of humankind has to be addressed.

So I repeat: in a free society people must be allowed to believe what they like, even stupid, ignorant and absurd things, provided they do no harm to others. Religious organizations have every right to exist and have their say, just as any other self-selected, self-constituted interest group does, such as trade unions and political parties. But religious organizations have to recognize that they are such groups, and nothing more than such groups—that they are civil society organizations like trade unions, existing to protect and promote their own interests—and although they have the same rights, they do not have any greater rights.

And here is the problem: the religions think they have much greater rights than anyone or anything else – rights to be heard, to be exempt from laws, to be awarded special privileges, to be given our tax money to run their own schools, to have representatives in the House of Lords plus all those retired bishops and archbishops who are now life peers), to be given hours of air time on publicly funded radio every week, to have charitable status, to have their hospital chaplains paid for by the public purse, and so on and endlessly on, getting a huge slice of the pie out of all proportion to the realities: which—as an indication of the overall picture—are that about 3 percent of the population go to Church of England services every Sunday, less than 10 percent of

the population going weekly to any church, temple, mosque or synagogue. And the state goes along with it!

How can this be tolerable? All religious organizations should be relegated to the status of private self-selected and self-constituted NGOs like trade unions and other lobby groups, should survive on what money they can raise from their adherents, should have the same and no more than the same rights and entitlements as any other such organization and should stop getting privileges, money and an amplification for their views (views, never forget, derived from the beliefs of illiterate goat-herds in ancient times) from government.

What would we think if the Labour party or Conservative party received taxpayers' money to run Labour party or Conservative party schools to teach 3- and 4-year-olds their party principles? Or astrologers, crystal gazers, voodoo merchants, druids, witches – all self-described and self-selected as such, and all parti-pris in their own way?

Let us note how the archbishops and rabbi stand together to block progress towards more humane laws. Technically, of course, each archbishop is doctrinally obliged to regard the other one and the rabbi as one or more heretic, infidel or apostate; their organizations spent most of history fighting, persecuting and executing each other; indeed all religions have to regard all other religions as getting it wrong and misleading their votaries.

But when the religions are after a common goal, as with getting our tax money for their faith-based schools, or exemption from discrimination laws, or seats in parliament, they are a united front. This used to be called hypocrisy, but no doubt modern theology has come up with a convoluted polysyllable to redefine it.

Not that a new name helps much; rubbish smells as bad no matter what you call it.

MORE FROM PHILOSOPHER A. C. GRAYLING

A human lifespan is less than a thousand months long. You need to make some time to think how to live it.

When I was 14 a chaplain at school gave me a reading list. I read everything and I went back to him with a question: how can you really believe in this stuff?

Science is the outcome of being prepared to live without certainty and therefore a mark of maturity. It embraces doubt and loose ends.

Every professor of philosophy needs a nine-year-old daughter. Mine has a habit of saying, "Daddy, that is a very silly idea."

She is always right.

ABORTION: "MORALLY EQUIVALENT" DOESN'T MEAN "POLITICALLY EQUIVALENT"

Marty Klein

(Reprinted from Humanist Network News, 6/17/09)

The President spoke eloquently this week on the need for Americans to find common ground on the issue of abortion. He made a start by naming the only common ground—the desire of almost everyone to reduce the number of abortions done each year.

And that's the end of the "common ground" conversation. People don't even agree on why they want fewer abortions. Some people think abortion is a bad thing. Other people think the need for abortion is a bad thing. The anti-choice side (we're all pro-life, after all) says it takes a "moral" position—that abortion is wrong. The pro-choice side says it takes a "moral" position – that adults should have personal autonomy.

So OK, everyone has a moral position on abortion. These positions may conflict, but they're both based on a moral vision. Neither side can logically deny that – these positions are based on equally heartfelt, equally clear, moral visions. What is not equivalent, however, is the political relevance of these moral visions.

The success of our country, our political system, and our way of life comes from a set of principles—unusual in the history of the world—that are not up for discussion. The most important one of those principles is this: Everyone is allowed to believe what they want. Adults are free to do what they want, as long as they don't hurt other people. In exchange for this extraordinary freedom, adults are expected to tolerate other adults believing and doing what they want.

While the pro-choice and anti-choice positions are equally based on morality, the difference between them politically is quite simple, and quite profound. The pro-choice position is "I'll behave according to my morality, and you behave according to yours." The anti-choice position is "I'll behave according to my morality, and you must behave according to mine, too."

And that's the end of the common ground that our president, and all these feel-good dialoging communities, yearn for. So let's acknowledge the real world. Let's all agree to do what we can to reduce the number of abortions. Let all the self-described "pro-life" people finally prove that they're genuinely against abortion—and not simply against sex—by supporting contraception, and the sex education that encourages people to use it. Beyond that, the "common ground" is to be found in our uniquely American legacy.

Over two centuries ago, our founders created a system that magically made it possible for people with conflicting moralities to live together. Until then, human communities were either morally homogenous, or they

lived with continuous warfare. America was the first country with neither, and so it has been a fountain of creativity and wealth—and yes, religious fervor—ever since. The system works. People just have to live within its rules. There's a name for people who want to undermine the political system in order to impose their moral viewpoint on their fellow citizens.

In other countries, we call them terrorists.

BUT ISN'T "ABSTINENCE-ONLY" THE ONLY SEX EDUCATION WE NEED?

(From National Secular Society (UK) Newslines 7/24/09)

The truth at last – abstinence-only programs make the situation worse. To the surprise of few outside the rarefied world of the Religious Right, it has emerged that “abstinence only” policies led to a rise in teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), birth rates among teenagers aged 15 or older had been in decline since 1991 but rose sharply in more than half of American states after 2005. The number of teenage girls with syphilis had risen by nearly half after a big decrease, while a 20-year fall in the gonorrhea infection rate was being reversed. AIDS cases in adolescent boys had nearly doubled.

The CDC says Bible Belt southern states have the highest rates of teen pregnancy and STDs. In addition, about 16,000 pregnancies were reported among girls aged 10-14 in 2004 and a similar number of those children reported having a sexually transmitted disease. Some of the statistics the CDC report reveals:

75% of teens will have sex prior to age 20.

The teenage birth rate in the US is the highest in the developed world.

One-third of youths have not received any instruction on methods of birth control before the age of 18.

The number of teen pregnancies is double in areas where abstinence is the only method of birth control taught as opposed to areas where there is comprehensive sex education and condoms are handed out. ...

However, religious proponents of the “abstinence-only” policies still insist that the reason for the rise is because their policies were not promoted hard enough.

Any book which claims to have been inspired or even authored by a Supreme Being will at some point be taken at its word by someone [see next articles – Ed.], who will be vested with the ultimate authority. Hate may not be explicitly taught at Sunday schools, but it is part of the backdrop, just as it is in madrassas: if we explain away or dismiss divinely sanctioned violence and injustice, we should not wonder why life is so cheap today.

— Peter McKenna, Independent (U.K.)

DENNIS MIDDLEBROOKS WRITES *THE DAILY NEWS* ABOUT MURDERER GEORGE SODINI

It is clear from Sodini's 8/3/09 quote cited in his “Deadly Online Diary” that he was convinced that he could get away with mass murder and still go to heaven. As he indicated, “eternal life does not depend on works.” Sodini displayed a sound understanding of fundamentalist Christian doctrine. It is through faith alone that people are saved. Martin Luther and John Calvin stressed this.

Killing three women and committing suicide is a trifle compared to being an atheist or agnostic, or any religious believer other than Christian. Then you burn in hell forever, even if you are a saint!

Will the media now investigate Sodini's religious affiliations given his statements? Or would that be out of bounds, given the sacred cow status of religion in this “God-fearing” country?

IS GEORGE SODINI WITH JESUS?

Daniel Florian

(From unreasonablefaith.com, 8/7/09)

“Eternal life does not depend on works. If it did, we will all be in hell. Christ paid for every sin, so how can I or you be judged by God for a sin when the penalty was already paid. People judge but that does not matter.”

Common evangelical beliefs, right? Many Christians would say “Amen!” to that if it was said by a preacher.

It's actually taken from the online journal of George Sodini ... his justification for killing people. God forgives sin, salvation is not based on works but on faith. You can kill people—as biblical heroes did—and still have the favor of God. ...

Perhaps some people need religion to be moral, but does that really make up for all the evil people do in the name of religion?

BOB HERBERT HAS ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

(Excerpted from his Op-Ed column, “Women at Risk,” in The New York Times, 8/8/09)

We've seen this tragic ritual so often that it has the feel of a formula. A guy is filled with a seething rage toward women and has easy access to guns. The result: mass slaughter.

Back in the fall of 2006, a fiend invaded an Amish schoolhouse in rural Pennsylvania, separated the girls from the boys, and then shot 10 of the girls, killing five.

I wrote, at the time, that there would have been thunderous outrage if someone had separated potential victims by race or religion and then shot, say, only the blacks, or only the whites, or only the Jews. But if you

shoot only the girls or only the women, not so much of an uproar. ...

We have become so accustomed to living in a society saturated with misogyny that the barbaric treatment of women and girls has come to be more or less expected. We would become much more sane, much healthier, as a society if we could bring ourselves to acknowledge that misogyny is a serious and pervasive problem, and that the twisted way so many men feel about women, combined with the absurdly easy availability of guns, is a toxic mix of the most tragic proportions.

WE HAVE TWO MORE CANDIDATES FOR THE 2009 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD

In June, Samuel Joe (the Plumber) Wurzelbacher, offered us all this bit of time-traveling wisdom:

"The founding fathers knew socialism doesn't work; they knew communism doesn't work."



Senator John Thune of South Dakota, defending his proposed (defeated) legislation to allow people with concealed carry permits in any state to carry their guns in any other state, regardless of that state's laws, answering Chuck Schumer:

"I say to my colleague from New York that if someone who has a concealed carry permit in the State of South Dakota that [sic] goes to New York and is in Central Park – Central Park is a much safer place."

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #92

Mark Muller, the president of Max Motors in Missouri, is offering a gift certificate for a Kalashnikov AK-47 rifle to anyone who purchases a pick-up truck. Muller, whose slogan is "God, Guns, Guts, and American Pick-Up Trucks," said the response to the offer has been very strong. "There is a lot of worry about crime, we have a methamphetamine problem round here and people just want to protect themselves."

MANNING THE RAMPARTS IN DEFENSE OF THE LANGUAGE OF SHAKESPEARE AND MILTON

On June 20, reactionary nativist Pat Buchanan hosted a conference to discuss how Republicans can regain a majority in America. Panelists suggested supporting English-only initiatives as a prime way of attracting "working class white Democrats."

One salient feature of the event was the banner hanging over the English-only advocates. The word conference was spelled "Conferenece."

RELIGION ROUND THE WORLD: A SUMMER OF SILLINESS AND STUPIDITY

Latvia: A financial company in Riga is offering residents loans secured by nothing but their immortal souls. The firm, named Kontora, does not require a credit history record or proof of employment. It grants loans of 50 to 500 Latvian lats (\$100 to \$1,000) to any adult after he or she signs a very short agreement.

According to the agreement, the only security required of the borrower is their immortal soul, which they are asked to confirm as their previously un-mortgaged property.

The loan is subject to one percent per day in interest until full repayment. [Ed. Note: That's a 365 APR!] The period of full repayment is 90 days, and in case the borrower fails to return the money, the creditor gets full possession of his soul. — [Ed: We are not making this up.]



Your loan officer

Israel: In August, about 50 rabbis and kaballah mystics flew around Israel in a chartered plane blowing on ritual rams' horns and ceremonial trumpets to frighten away the H1N1 swine flu virus. [Israel and swine, get it?]

Somalia: The Islamist group Shahab is stopping people on the streets and checking their teeth. Anyone with a gold or silver tooth is dragged to a masked man who rips out the offending denture with pincers. Why? Such display of luxury and fashion, says Shahab, is un-Islamic.

Turkey: A Turkish television show is offering contestants what it claims is the "biggest prize ever" – the chance for atheists to convert to one of the world's major religions. The show, called "Penitents Compete," features a Muslim imam, a Catholic priest, a Jewish rabbi and a Buddhist monk attempting to persuade ten atheists of the merits of their respective religions.

If the clerics succeed, the contestants are rewarded with a pilgrimage to one of their chosen faith's most sacred sites – Mecca for Muslims, Jerusalem for converts to Judaism, a trip to Tibet for Buddhists and the chance to visit Ephesus and the Vatican for Christians. (Thanks to Mike Tuchman for this bit of weirdness.)

Texas: A man in a tattoo parlor in Denton had the inker inscribe "Only God can judge me" on his arm, along with a pair of praying hands. When his credit card was rejected for the \$200 charge, he ran. (Flash Light, who forwarded this, says "Only God can catch him, too.")

Connecticut: Yale University Press, which is publishing *The Cartoons That Shook the World*, about the 12 Danish drawings that Muslim extremists used as a pretext to foment riots around the world, announced that in consideration of Muslim sensibilities the book about the cartoons will not include the cartoons.

MOSES MAKES JESUS, MO AND THE BARMAID SICK

Moses: I've had it with organized religion – I'm a free spirit. But I'm not one of those boring atheists who have no room in their lives for the supernatural.

Mohammed: He's going to say it, isn't he?

Barmaid: Surely not.

Moses: I rise above the believer and the atheist, secure in the knowledge that there is "Something Else."

Jesus: Here it comes ...

Moses: I'm not religious, I'm spiritual!

Mohammed: Jesus Christ.

Barmaid: I've just been sick in my mouth.

AN EGREGIOUS OMISSION CORRECTED

The John Quincy Adams article [in July PIQUE] reads well. Only one thing missing: you left out the fact that JQA refused to take the Presidential oath on the Bible because it would have gone against his belief in the separation of church and state. That's what Pique'd my interest in him in the first place. – Joan Slomanson

To the Editor: Kathy Freston's article "What If We Were All Vegetarians, Just for a Day" [July PIQUE] is replete with the kind of fanciful and dubious "statistics" that we hear again and again from the New-Age vegetarian fringe. An explanation of the origin and support basis for this "data" would be illuminating. — Chic Schissel

THE PREACHERS WERE RIGHT: HE'S THE DEVIL'S SPAWN!

The actor Daniel Radcliffe, who plays Harry Potter in the eponymous film series, told Esquire Magazine: "I'm an atheist, but I'm very relaxed about it. I don't preach my atheism, but I have a huge amount of respect for people like Richard Dawkins who do. Anything he does on television, I will watch." He joked: "There we go, Dan, that's half of America that's not going to see the next Harry Potter film on the back of that comment."



OH NO, BRAD PITT'S GOING TO HELL, TOO!

Brad Pitt was raised as a Southern Baptist, but apparently, his faith didn't stick. The 45-year-old actor doesn't believe in God, he told Bild.com. "No, no, no!" he declared, when asked if he believes in a higher power, or if he was spiritual. "I'm probably 20 percent atheist and 80 percent agnostic. I don't think anyone really knows. You'll either find out or not when you get there; until then there's no point thinking about it."



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eternal damnation
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A C Grayling
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Genesis: Let's start over!
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