

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

July, 2012

Happy Fourth! Let's declare independence from some patriotic myths. Then let's question free will (again!), consider true *unbelievers* among us, unnecessary arguments between philosophy and physics, whether Klingons love Jesus, the (maybe) genetic generation of morality, a six-year-old's take on bliss, and Presidents who toke. We have a new Dumbth candidate, more Bible wisdom, Italian skepticism, and lots – really, lots – of letters generated by June PIQUE. So, see you in September. – JR

NO PIQUE IN AUGUST

The Editor, as well as all our local and national staff, and all our correspondents and stringers in all our offices and bureaus worldwide, will be on vacation. – JR

JOHN ADAMS ON "THE REAL AMERICAN REVOLUTION"

The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations ... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution. – *John Adams, 1818*

THIS FOURTH OF JULY, LET'S STOP WORRYING WHAT THE FOUNDERS WOULD THINK

Joshua Holland

(Excerpted from *Alternet.com*, 7/1/2011)

History bears little resemblance to the cartoonish view of the birth of the nation that most people hold. Our forefathers didn't just wake up one morning, declare "No taxation without representation!" and then wait for Paul Revere to tell them *It's on*. It was a period of 30 years of internal struggle to define what this new country might look like, and the notion that there were some immutable principles on which everyone agreed is entirely wrong.

In her book, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle Over American History*, Jill Lepore, a historian at Harvard, writes: "Beginning even before it was over, the Revolution has been put to wildly varying political purposes." Between 1761, when the first signs of discontent with England became apparent in the Colonies, and 1791,

when the Bill of Rights was ratified, Lepore explains that leading Americans debated an "ocean of ideas" from which "you can fish anything out".

Indeed, ever since the last of those revolutionaries we've come to call the "Founding Fathers" shuffled off this mortal coil, Americans from across the political spectrum have claimed to be continuing on in their tradition. Saying the Founders would be standing firmly behind one's ideological preferences—or that they'd be rolling over in their graves contemplating one's opponents'—is a rich tradition in American politics. Back in the 1820s, Andrew Jackson's Democratic Republicans insisted they were the true Constitutionals, as did the Whigs they opposed. Both sides of the Civil War made the claim, as did civil rights crusaders and Southern segregationists.

The Tea Partiers are obviously the latest in this long tradition. Lepore found that their "view of American history bore almost no resemblance" to the one she studies and teaches. "What was curious about the Tea Party's revolution", she writes, "was that it wasn't just kooky history, it was *anti-history*".

Conservatives tend to swear an almost religious allegiance to the Constitution, but ... their "originalism" is simply a crutch used to avoid making substantive arguments – an appeal to the Founders, who have come to be the highest authorities in America after God. Almost everything on their ideological wish-list is justified by vague references to that great document. ...

The Constitution was a beautiful document, but it was not intended to be a detailed guidebook for governing the country. Lepore writes that "the Founders were not prophets. Nor did they hope to be worshipped. They believed to defer without serious examination to what your forefathers believed is to become a slave of the past."

BOARD OF DIRECTORS: John Rafferty, *President*; Robert A. Murtha, Jr., *Vice President*; Donna Marxer, *Treasurer*; Lee Loshak, *Secretary*; Remo Cosentino; Arthur Harris; Elaine Lynn; Carl Marxer; Irv Millman; Carlos Mora; John Wagner; Mike Weiss

SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / 212-308-2165 / www.shsny.org

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 an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism, and a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association.

Indeed, Lepore notes that it was none other than Thomas Jefferson who wrote, "Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the arc of the covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human."

In Federalist 44, James Madison wondered if it was "not the glory of the people of America, that ... they have not suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names, to overrule the suggestions of their own good sense, the knowledge of their own situation, and the lessons or their own experience?"

This gets to the heart of the matter: the Founders were grappling with 18th century problems, and would be bewildered by the debates we're having today. When people say that the Founders, were they to be reanimated today, would be shocked by this or that policy, keep in mind that what would really stun them is indoor plumbing, horseless carriages and flying machines, not to mention all these women and free black people daring to cast votes in our elections. ... They fought their era's battles and they won. Meanwhile, we've got 21st century problems to deal with.

OUR FOUNDING CONVICTS

Anthony Vaver

(Excerpted from Bound With An Iron Chain, reprinted on Delanceyplace.com, 11/14/2011)

Most early Americans, if you exclude the important category of Native Americans, were African slaves, convicts from Britain who were forcibly shipped to America, and indentured servants:

More than 50,000 convicted felons were ... uprooted from their families and friends in Great Britain between 1718 and 1775 and forced to travel overseas to begin new lives as indentured servants in the American colonies. The number of convicts who made this trip was not insignificant. During these years, one out of every four British immigrants who landed in America was a convict.

To put the 50,000 number in even more perspective, when Britain regularly started sending convicts to the American colonies in 1718, the white population of Maryland was around 50,000. And in 1765—10 years before convict transportation to America came to an end—the entire population of Boston was only 15,520. All told, British convicts constituted one of the largest groups of people ever to be forced to immigrate to America, second only to African slaves. ...

Almost as soon as convict transportation to America came to an end, Americans began to downplay the number and significance of criminals sent to the colonies. ... Only in the latter part of the 20th century did historians finally begin to research convict transportation to America in a serious and systematic way. Today, historians generally agree on the 50,000 number. ...

Convict transportation adds new dimensions to popular notions of immigration to early America that go beyond Pilgrims and brave men crossing the Atlantic in search of religious freedom and unlimited opportunity in

a new, untamed land. Most of the people transported to America were ... petty criminals who came out of the ranks of the destitute poor.

Between 1700 and 1775, a total of 585,800 immigrants arrived in the 13 colonies from all over the world. About 52,200 of these immigrants were convicts and prisoners (9 percent). Slaves by far constituted the largest group (278,400; 47 percent), followed by people arriving with their freedom (151,600; 26 percent) and indentured servants (96,600; 18 percent). Note that almost three-quarters of all the people arriving in the American colonies during this time period did so without their freedom.

MORALITY IS IN OUR GENES – Part 1

Walter Balcerak

Theists often contend that we need god to be moral. Many secularists, on the other hand, think morality can be achieved by reason. According to Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind*, both positions are basically wrong. His book offers convincing evidence that morality is encoded in our genes.

"[A]n obsession with righteousness . . . is the normal human condition", says Haidt, who for the last 16 years has been a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. He stresses that "it is a feature of our evolutionary design". He believes morality's evolutionary role is to foster social cohesion. After all, how could societies flourish if all of us were totally selfish? "Our righteous minds made it possible for human beings—but no other animals—to produce large cooperative groups, tribes and nations without the glue of kinship", Haidt writes. He goes so far as to assert "that morality is the extraordinary human capacity that made civilization possible".

Haidt does credit religion with a role in moral behavior, but he thinks its main contribution, like morality itself, is to strengthen social bonds. However, he probably overstates the point when he contends that groups "create supernatural beings not to explain the universe but to order society". In my opinion, creating myths that explain the universe has always been an important function of religion.

Haidt supports many of his views with research done by him and other scientists. For example, studies by three Yale psychologists indicate that our awareness of moral behavior begins very early in life. The findings suggest, says Haidt, that "by six months of age, infants are watching how people behave toward other people, and they are developing a preference for those who are nice rather than those who are mean".

The Righteous Mind is extremely rich in ideas and insights. Here are some excerpts, slightly amended:

Natural selection favors morality because, as Darwin said, the most cohesive and cooperative groups usually beat groups of selfish individualists.

Our "higher nature" allows us to be profoundly altruistic, but our altruism is mostly aimed at members of our own group.

Our moral impulse is mainly about fairness and doing

no harm, not loyalty, respect, duty, piety, patriotism or tradition. Other aspects of morality differ around the world and even within societies.

We consider some actions wrong, even if they don't hurt anyone.

Defining morality as justice—not authority, hierarchy and tradition—supports secular viewpoints.

Children distinguish between moral rules and conventional rules.

Most societies, unlike those in the West, place the needs of groups first and subordinate the needs of individuals.

Moral intuitions arise automatically and almost instantaneously.

Moral reasoning is mainly ruled by the emotions, not rationality. It mostly attempts to justify judgments already made.

Reason, combined with a lack of moral emotions, can create psychopaths.

(Part 2, in September PIQUE, will deal with the polarization of politics and religion caused by shared moral narratives.)

CALVIN DEFINES BLISS FOR HOBBS

Bill Watterson

(In this excerpt from the late-great comic strip, six-year-old Calvin and his stuffed-toy (but real to Calvin) tiger Hobbes are careening downhill in Calvin's toy wagon.)

Calvin: It's true, Hobbes, ignorance is bliss. Once you know things, you start seeing problems everywhere. And once you see problems, you feel like you ought to try to fix them. And fixing problems always seems to require personal change. And change means doing things that aren't fun ... and I say phooey to that. But if you're willfully stupid, you don't know any better, so you can keep doing whatever you like. The secret to happiness is short-term, stupid self-interest.

Hobbes: We're heading for the cliff.

Calvin: I don't want to know about it.

PHYSICISTS VS PHILOSOPHERS

Jim Holt

(Reprinted from "Physicists, Stop the Churlishness", in The New York Times, 6/8/2012)

Akerfuffle has broken out between philosophy and physics. It began earlier this spring when a philosopher (David Albert) gave a sharply negative review in this paper to a book by a physicist (Lawrence Krauss) that purported to solve, by purely scientific means, the mystery of the universe's existence. The physicist responded to the review by calling the philosopher who wrote it "moronic" and arguing that philosophy, unlike physics, makes no progress and is rather boring, if not totally useless. And then the kerfuffle was joined on both sides.

This is hardly the first occasion on which physicists have made disobliging comments about philosophy. Last year at a Google "Zeitgeist conference" in England, Stephen Hawking declared that philosophy was "dead". Another great physicist, the Nobel laureate Steven

Weinberg, has written that he finds philosophy "murky and inconsequential" and of no value to him as a working scientist. And Richard Feynman, in his famous lectures on physics, complained that "philosophers are always with us, struggling in the periphery to try to tell us something, but they never really understand the subtleties and depths of the problem".

Why do physicists have to be so churlish toward philosophy? Philosophers, on the whole, have been much nicer about science. "Philosophy consists in stopping when the torch of science fails us", Voltaire wrote back in the 18th century. And in the last few decades, philosophers have come to see their enterprise as continuous with that of science. It is noteworthy that the "moronic" philosopher who kicked up the recent shindy by dismissing the physicist's book himself holds a Ph.D. in theoretical physics.

Physicists say they do not need any help from philosophers. But sometimes physicists are, whether they realize it or not, actually engaging in philosophy themselves. And some of them do it quite well. Mr. Weinberg, for instance, has written brilliantly on the limits of scientific explanation — which is, after all, a philosophical issue. It is also an issue about which contemporary philosophers have interesting things to say.

Mr. Weinberg has attacked philosophical doctrines like "positivism" (which says that science should concern itself only with things that can actually be observed). But positivism happens to be a mantle in which Mr. Hawking proudly wraps himself; he has declared that he is "a positivist who believes that physical theories are just mathematical models we construct, and that it is meaningless to ask if they correspond to reality". Is Mr. Hawking's positivism the same positivism that Mr. Weinberg decries? That, one supposes, would be an issue for philosophical discussion.

The physicist Sir Roger Penrose is certainly not a positivist. He is a self-avowed "Platonist". since he believes (like Plato) that mathematical ideas have an objective existence. The disagreement between Mr. Hawking the positivist and Mr. Penrose the Platonist — a philosophical one! — has hard scientific consequences: because of it, they take radically opposed views of what is going on when a quantum measurement is made. Is one of them guilty of philosophical naïveté? Are they both?

Finally, consider the anti-philosophical strictures of Richard Feynman. "Cocktail party philosophers", he said in a lecture, think they can discover things about the world "by brainwork" rather than by experiment ("the test of all knowledge"). But in another lecture, he announced that the most pregnant hypothesis in all of science is that "all things are made of atoms". Who first came up with this hypothesis? The ancient philosophers Leucippus and Democritus. And they didn't come up with it by doing experiments.

Today the world of physics is in many ways conceptually unsettled. Will physicists ever find an interpretation of quantum mechanics that makes sense? Is "quantum entanglement" logically consistent with special relativity? Is string theory empirically meaningful? How are time and

entropy related? Can the constants of physics be explained by appeal to an unobservable “multiverse”?

Philosophers have in recent decades produced sophisticated and illuminating work on all these questions. It would be a pity if physicists were to ignore it.

And what about the oft-heard claim that philosophy, unlike science, makes no progress? As Bertrand Russell (himself no slouch at physics and mathematics) observed, philosophy aims at knowledge, and as soon as it obtains definite knowledge in a specific area, that area ceases to be called “philosophy”. And scientific progress gives philosophers more and more to do. Allow me to quote Nietzsche (although I know that will be considered by some to be in bad taste): “As the circle of science grows larger, it touches paradox at more places.” Physicists expand the circle, and philosophers help clear up the paradoxes.

May both camps flourish.

WHEN CHRISTIANITY CONQUERED THE UNIVERSE Alasdair Wilkins

(From *io9.com*, 6/30/11, and forwarded by Colin Rafferty)

By the 1700s, there could no longer be any doubt. Earth was just one of many worlds orbiting the Sun, which forced scientists and theologians alike to ponder a tricky question. Would God really have bothered to create empty worlds?

To many thinkers, the answer was an emphatic “No”, and so cosmic pluralism—the idea that *every* world is inhabited, often including the Sun—was born. And this was no fringe theory. Many of the preeminent astronomers of the 18th and 19th century, including Uranus discoverer Sir William Herschel, believed in it wholeheartedly, as did other legendary thinkers like John Locke and Benjamin Franklin.

How could so many geniuses believe in something so silly? To answer that question, we need to understand just what science was hundreds of years ago, at a time when it was freely intertwined with philosophy and theology, when analogies and metaphors were considered almost as good a form of evidence as data and observation. Cosmic pluralism offers us a chance to look back at how very differently people used to approach scientific inquiry ... and, as a bonus, it provides some wonderfully insane quotes from otherwise brilliant scientists.

The Birth of the Plurality of Worlds

Nicolaus Copernicus demonstrated that the Earth was not the center of the universe, and the telescope provided clear proof that celestial bodies like the Moon and the planets were all worlds in much the same way Earth was, and that they potentially might be inhabitable.

These twin discoveries suggested that the Earth was not fundamentally unique in the cosmos. The theology of the period held that Earth existed as the expression of God’s plan, so it was a bit puzzling why he had apparently created a bunch of other worlds that were sort of like Earth but served no clear purpose. There were two possible

solutions, both of which were vigorously championed by their proponents: either Earth was still unique from all other worlds in some way more subtle than humans could comprehend, or else *every other planet was inhabited as well, preferably by Christians.*

As you might imagine, the latter theory makes for way more interesting reading, as scientists tied themselves in logical knots in a desperate attempt to knit together the scientific data with the demands of their philosophies. And the most powerful blunt instrument at these thinkers’ disposal was the analogy.

Arguments of Analogy

For all the fierce debate on cosmic pluralism, most people agreed on one crucial point: direct observation wasn’t going to prove anything. Writing in the 1850s, the Scottish physicist and astronomer Sir David Brewster considered the planet Mars, which he pointed out was always at least 50 million miles from Earth. (The closest distance between the two planets is actually more like 34 million miles, but let’s not quibble too much.) Even with a telescope with a power of 1,000, Mars would still appear to be 50,000 miles away, which is much too far away to say with any certainty whether it is inhabited or not.

By this standard, Brewster argued, even the Moon would not appear close enough for anyone to say with certainty if any Moon people lived upon it. But what telescopes *did* provide was lots of evidence of how similar all the planets were, and from this it was possible to construct analogies as evidence for cosmic pluralism. As an example, Brewster considered the eye, which comes in vastly different shapes and sizes in different animals but “is always adapted to the existence and properties of light”. In fact, the presence of eyes *demand*s the presence of light, or else “all this delicate optical machinery would be wasted”.

This is a recurrent theme in all the arguments for cosmic pluralism – if one thing works in a certain way or has a particular feature, then surely another thing would have the same workings or features. That might sound like I’m being patronizing, but it’s hard to describe the arguments involved in any more sophisticated fashion. One wonderfully weird bit of reasoning came from Johann Bode, an otherwise rightly acclaimed German astronomer who named Uranus and described its orbit with great precision, thanks in part to his work with Bode’s Law. And yet he also had this to say about about the existence of people on the Sun:

“Who would doubt their existence? The most wise author of the world assigns an insect lodging on a grain of sand and will certainly not permit ... the great ball of the sun to be empty of creatures and still less of rational inhabitants who are ready gratefully to praise the author of life.”

Basically, if you’re going to argue that a grain of sand is inhabited while the Sun isn’t, you’re calling God an idiot. That doesn’t exactly leave much room for reasonable debate. In any event, metaphors and analogies were considered acceptable arguments because not only were science, religion, and philosophy all jumbled together, but also because all the

different scientific fields were interchangeable. The biology of the eye or the ecology of sand were directly comparable to the habitability of the Sun. If you've ever wanted evidence that people in the past viewed the world in a fundamentally different way than we do now ... well, I doubt you're going to find much better evidence.

Christianity Conquers the Cosmos!

So, thanks to the power of analogy, 18th and 19th century thinkers were able to demonstrate that the entire solar system was teeming with life. But what sort of life? Were these Lunatics (actual term for Moon people) and Solarians strange, unknowable alien beings? Would the vastly different conditions of life on other worlds force these creatures to take on bizarre shapes simply to survive?

That was not, as it happens, the generally held view. Sir David Brewster used the mother of all run-on sentences to list every bit of evidence that other planets and celestial bodies behaved in the way our world does, and from this he reached one inescapable conclusion:

"We trace throughout all the heavenly bodies the same uniformity of plan, is it possible to resist the influence an uniformity of purpose; so that if we find a number of spheres linked together by the same bond, and governed by the same laws of matter, we are entitled to conclude that the end for which one of these was constituted, must be the great general end of all, – to become a home of rational and God-glorifying creatures."

Brewster is making what's known as a teleological argument, which holds that existence has some intrinsic goal or purpose. The basic idea hangs around to this day in some of the arguments for intelligent design or the finely tuned universe, but those only go so far as to say humanity's existence is the goal. As far as Brewster was concerned, that wasn't nearly enough – what's the point of aliens if they're not going to have human religion?

This argument cut to the heart of what made cosmic pluralism so appealing to 18th and 19th century thinkers. At its most basic, the theory expanded God's reach to the entire cosmos, which seemed to be more in keeping with the whole concept of omnipotence. (As you might imagine, there was plenty of disagreement on this, with some arguing a universe full of more or less identical Christians devalued the whole point of being one in the first place.) ...

Cosmic Pluralism Today

For all its popularity and widespread acceptance well into the mid-19th century, cosmic pluralism was always an untenable compromise between science and theology, and improved understanding of astronomy and biology made it clear that the Moon, the Sun, and the planets around us were definitely not inhabited, and certainly not by intelligent, God-fearing aliens.

By the dawn of the 20th century, it was back to being just another fringe theory. Indeed, a century's worth of scientific progress arguably brought astronomers to the precise opposite conclusion in the form of the Rare Earth hypothesis. This idea holds that the conditions of life are so unlikely that we might be on one of the very, very few

planets in the universe capable of supporting life.

And yet, on some level, cosmic pluralism has been making a comeback of late, albeit without its former theological aspects. While Earth remains the only known home of life in the universe, intelligent or otherwise, there's growing scientific support for the idea that other bodies in our solar system, such as Mars or Saturn's moon Titan, either are home to very basic life or were at some point in their long histories.

But why limit ourselves to just the solar system? Thanks to the Kepler mission, we've now estimated that there could be as many as two billion Earth-like planets in our galaxy alone, and *that* might be a gross underestimate.

DID JESUS DIE FOR KLINGONS, TOO?

Gavin Allen

(From Daily Mail (UK), 10/4/2011, forwarded by Flash Light)

A Christian professor has told a U.S. Government-backed conference on space travel that the discovery of aliens would lead to significant problems for his own religion. In a speech entitled "Did Jesus die for Klingons too?" German academic Christian Weidemann outlined the possible ramifications that the ultimate space discovery would engender.

Speaking at the 100 Year Starship Symposium in Orlando ... Weidemann, a professor at the Ruhr-University Bochum, said the death of Christ was designed to save all creation. However, that includes 125 billion galaxies with hundreds of billions of stars in each galaxy. That means that if intelligent life exists on other planets, then Jesus would have to have visited them too, and sacrificed himself equally for Martian-kind as well as mankind.

"If there are extra-terrestrial intelligent beings, it is safe to assume that most of them are sinners too. Did Jesus save them too? ... I say No. If so, our position among intelligent beings in the universe would be very exceptional."

Among Weidemann's suggestions as to how Jesus and God may have tackled the issue of visiting other alien planets, he argues it is possible God could have sent multiple incarnations of Himself into space, with one attending each inhabited planet ... [which] would require around 250 incarnations of God to exist at any one time.

Comment: Jesus Christ! Don't we have enough problems with one Jesus Christ? – JR

THIS MONTH'S BIBLE STUDY LESSON

"Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man." – *Numbers 31:17-18*
"All scripture is given by inspiration of God." – *1Timothy*

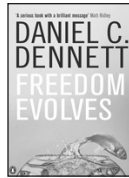
MAURICE SENDAK, 1928-2012

You know who my gods are, who I believe in fervently? Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson – she's probably the top – Mozart, Shakespeare, Keats. These are wonderful gods who have gotten me through the narrow straits of life.

SHSNY CALENDAR: JULY - SEPTEMBER 2012

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURSDAY, JULY 5, 6:30 pm
 in the front room of
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK
28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)
 (3 doors West of the church - red door)
We'll discuss
FREEDOM EVOLVES
by Daniel Dennett

Can there be freedom and free will in a deterministic world? Philosopher Daniel Dennett emphatically answers "yes!", showing how we alone among the animals have evolved minds that give us free will and morality.



Dennett explains in a series of strikingly original arguments—drawing upon evolutionary biology, cognitive neuroscience, economics, and philosophy—that far from being an enemy of traditional explorations of freedom, morality, and meaning, the evolutionary perspective can be an indispensable ally. He seeks to place ethics on the foundation it deserves: a realistic, naturalistic, potentially unified vision of our place in nature. — *Paper edition available.*

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.
The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

PLANNING AHEAD
SHSNY Book Club: First Thursday at the Community Church of NY
Movie Night: Second Monday at Stone Creek Lounge.
Brunch: Third Sunday at BXL East Bistro.
Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday at Stone Creek Lounge.
 More info: www.shsn.org,
at.humanism.meetup.com/515,
 and 212-308-2165

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, AUGUST 2, 6:30 pm
 at Community Church of NY
THE FAITH INSTINCT:
How Religion Evolved,
and Why It Endures
by Nicholas Wade

For the last 50,000 years, and probably much longer, people have practiced religion. Yet little attention has been given to the question of whether this universal human behavior might have been implanted in human nature, a by-product of our evolution.

In this original and thought-provoking work, *New York Times* science writer Wade traces how religion grew to be so essential to early societies in their struggle for survival, how an instinct for faith became hardwired into human nature, and how it provided an impetus for law and government.

Paper and e-book editions available.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURSDAY, SEPT 6, 6:30 pm
 at Community Church of NY
THE MAKING OF THE FITTEST:
DNA and the Ultimate Forensic
Record of Evolution
by Sean Carroll

Very recently, an important new aspect of DNA has been revealed—it contains a detailed record of evolution. That is, DNA is a living chronicle of how the marvelous creatures that inhabit our planet have adapted to its many environments, from the freezing waters of the Antarctic to the lush canopy of the rain forest.

In the pages of this highly readable narrative, Sean Carroll guides the general reader on a tour of the massive DNA record of three billion years of evolution to see how the fittest are made. — *Paperback*

MONDAY, JULY 9, 7:00 pm
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
"CONTACT"

Based on the best-selling book by Carl Sagan, this visually stunning film



stars Jodie Foster as a woman who has devoted her life (like Sagan) to studying the stars—believing that there's life Out There. That belief makes her an outcast from the science establishment, until she actually receives a message from space. Well, we all receive the message, don't we? And what does that mean to humanity, science, and religion?

"Passionate and intelligent", this 1997 movie, also starring Matthew McConaughey, James Woods, and John Hurt, and directed by James Zemeckis, does not flinch from the big questions. A delight for the mind as well as the eye.

MON, AUGUST 13, 7:00 pm
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
"GRAND ILLUSION"

Director Jean Renoir's classic treatise on war, focusing on French prisoners (including Jean Gabin) during WWI and their cultured



German commandant (Erich von Stroheim), as the old order of aristocratic Europe disintegrates in the trenches.

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
 Check out the menu and prices at www.stonecreeknyc.com

SHSNY CALENDAR: JULY - SEPTEMBER 2012

BRUNCH!

SUNDAY, JULY 15, 12 NOON
and

SUNDAY, AUG 19, at NOON

We'll gather for our
MONTHLY CASUAL BRUNCH
at **BXL East, 210 East 51 St.**

We'll meet at Noon just east of 3rd Avenue for outstanding Belgian fare, with dishes ranging from waffles and crepes to big burgers, cheese-y onion soup, and pots of lots of mussels – \$7 to \$16, plus a prix-fixe Sunday Brunch (including a drink) for \$18. Everyone interested in getting together with 15-20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good grub (huge selection of beers!) and lively talk is welcome.

Bring friends!

WED, JULY 18, 7- 9 pm
CENTER FOR INQUIRY - NYC
THE NEUROSCIENCE &
PSYCHOLOGY OF NOSTALGIA:
How Memories of Our Past
Affect Our Present

Tishman Auditorium at The
New School - 66 West 12th St.

Is nostalgia healthy or harmful? Can neuroscience tell us anything about the phenomenon? How can nostalgia be used to influence our emotions and behavior?

Sandra Upson, Managing Editor at Scientific American Mind, will moderate a discussion between Professor Krystine Batcho, a psychologist and nostalgia expert at Le Moyne College; Professor Joseph LeDoux, an eminent neuroscientist studying memory at NYU; and you, the inquiring audience.

\$5 for the general public, free for members. Email nyc@centerforinquiry to RSVP. Tickets must be purchased in advance. No tickets will be sold at the door.

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, JULY 25, 7:00 pm
BIG HISTORY: HUMANS IN
THE COSMOS

Prof. David Christian
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

The Big History Project (founded by Bill Gates and San Diego State Prof. Christian) will expand your perspective on the past and alter the way you think about history and the world around you. You've heard parts of the story in courses on geology, history, anthropology, cosmology, and other disciplines.

Prof. Christian offers a grand perspective – *Big History* – that will enable you to understand remarkable parallels and connections among disciplines and teach you to view history on a grand scale.



GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, AUGUST 29, 7:00 pm
PARTICLES TO PEOPLE:
The Laws of Nature and
the Meaning of Life

Dr. Sean Carroll
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

Human beings do not stand outside of nature; we are a part of it. Our knowledge of science allows us to draw strong conclusions about the milieu in which we live. There is no telekinesis, astrology or life after death. Taking the laws of nature seriously opens a vista of possibility, freeing us from outmoded ideas about what it means to be human.

Great Lectures Night is FREE

OTHER REASONABLE NEW YORK EVENTS

Check them out at their websites or www.reasonablenewyork.org
NY Society for Ethical Culture:

Fri., July 6, 7 pm - Ethics in Film: "Crash". Snacks & Bevs, \$5.

Mon., July 9, 1:00 pm - Ethics in Film, "The Challenge for Africa" by Wangari Maathai. \$5.

Dinner & Philosophy Now: Mon, July 6, 7 pm, Bamiyan, 358 Third (at 26 St): "Doctor Who & Philosophy". \$2 entry fee, plus dinner.

CFI-NYC. Mon., July 9, 10 pm. Googie's Lounge (Upstairs at the Living Room), 154 Ludlow St.

"Skeptics on the Mic Karaoke".

New York Philosophy. Tue, July 17, 6-10 pm, Irish Rogue, 356 W. 44 St., discussing "Modern Love". See <http://nyphilosophy.com>

Drinking With Atheists: Every Friday, fun and conversation. Details www.meetup.com/RichiesList/

PLUS

Agnostic A.A.: Nine weekly AA-endorsed meetings in Manhattan, Brooklyn, The Bronx. Schedules: agnosticAA.nyc.org/meetings.html
Manhattan History Buffs: Every 3d Tues, 6:30, dinner and talk at Lili's (Chinese) restaurant, Third Ave., 83-84th. July 19: "Boss Tweed", Part 2. 212-802-7427.

Atheism History Week – With SHSNY's John Rafferty, 5:30 p.m. Wednesdays, MNN Ch. 67 and RNN Ch. 110 in Manhattan, and live streaming at www.mnn.org.

Religion on the Line: Sundays, 6-9:00 a.m. WMCA, 770AM

Equal Time for Freethought: Sundays 6:30 p.m., WBAI-NY 99.5FM

Religion & Ethics Newsweekly:

Sundays, 6:30 p.m., Channel 13
Socrates Cafe: Tuesdays, 6:30 p.m., NY Society for Ethical Culture

IT'S TIME TO LEGALIZE POT

John Rafferty

(Based in part on "New Survey: Most Americans Want to Legalize and Regulate Pot Like Alcohol and Tobacco", by Kristen Gwynne, on Alternet, 5/22/12)

The last three American presidents (at least) have all smoked weed. ("But I didn't inhale"? *Please.*) There is no question but that marijuana is America's favorite illegal intoxicant. How many adult Americans have *never* smoked pot? I'm sure not many. Probably damn few.

How do I know? Because despite decades of "devil weed" thunder from fundamentalist pulpits, and gobbledeygook "gateway drug" nonsense from federal agencies cowed by the alcohol and tobacco lobbies (who spent big in the 1930s to get the feds to classify previously-legal marijuana as a drug) and by politicians beholden to those lobbies and pandering to the most ignorant of their constituents, a clear majority of Americans—56 percent—now favor making marijuana legal and regulating and taxing it. Just as we do with those two other drugs, alcohol and tobacco. What's more, according to the Rasmussen Reports survey of 1,000 likely voters, only 36 percent oppose legalization and regulation.

If that were an election, it would be called a landslide.

Why this widespread liberal, if not libertarian attitude, in spite of all the official opposition? Because so many adults know, as Alternet's summary report showed in May, that marijuana is much safer than alcohol and cigarettes. We know that reckless behavior while stoned is more likely to be the over-consumption of ice cream than alcohol-fueled brawling or 90-mph driving. And that there is no record anywhere of anyone ever getting hooked on tetra-hydrocannabinol as this writer was on nicotine for 28 years.

Even the foes of legalization know that the laws don't work, that in fact they're counter-productive. As the Rasmussen Report opines,

"... harsh pot laws may encourage some people who would otherwise get stoned to drink instead. Legalizing and regulating the plant may thus allow some people to make safer decisions without risking unnecessary legal consequences."

Legalize-pot initiatives will be on the ballot in Colorado and Washington State this November, in spite of U.S. Department of Justice opposition, and both stand a good chance of passing. Even more states are considering medical-marijuana easements, also in spite of DOJ opposition.

The tide is turning.

So, why not just decriminalize Miss Maryjane? Give possession a pass and turn a blind eye to distribution?

Because not legalizing and regulating pot would leave the importation and distribution of cannabis in the hands of the same narco-criminals operating on mega-business scales today, without doing anything for the American economy or putting a nickel in state and federal coffers.

It's time to legalize pot.

Let's reap some benefit from the "vice" that literally millions of Americans enjoy. Let's cut off a huge source

of income for Mexico's murderous mobs. Let's grow pot, supervise it, sell it, and collect taxes on it right here in the U.S., just as we do tobacco. Let's use some of the hundreds of millions our state and federal treasuries will reap from those taxes to treat and get clean the millions whose lives have been blighted by heroin, cocaine, crack, crystal meth and prescription drugs. Let's unburden ourselves of the cost of imprisoning tens (hundreds?) of thousands of young men—nearly all African-American or Latino—whose only criminal act ever was selling, or even just possessing, some weed. Let's eliminate a major factor contributing to law-enforcement corruption all across the country. Let's take the first step away from the insane, 50-year-old, trillion-dollar and still-unwinnable "War On Drugs". Let's make America a little more reasonable, a little bit saner.

And that's why this a humanist issue.

Write your senators and representative.

WHY DOES RELIGION ALWAYS GET A FREE RIDE? – Part 2

Greta Christina

(Excerpted from alternet.org, 4/29/2012)

(Ed: In Part 1 of this essay, in June PIQUE, Ms. Christina posited that religion – any and every religion – is an idea about the world, society, and humanity, and that "the heart of the matter" is: "Why should religion be treated differently from all other kinds of ideas? Why shouldn't we criticize it, and make fun of it, and try to persuade people out of it, the way we do with every other kind of idea?" Her argument continues here. – JR)

It's certainly true that, throughout history, many attempts to "persuade" people out of religion have resulted in persecution – or have provided the rationalization for it.

Human beings have an ugly, bloody, terrible history of persecuting each other over religious differences: anti-Catholic hostility in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, anti-Muslim hostility in much of Europe today, the Crusades, the Holocaust, the list goes on. And religious persecution often goes hand-in-hand with classism, jingoistic nationalism, ethnic hatreds, and racism – rendering it even uglier. A lot of people can only see persuading people out of religion in this context of persecution, and are horrified by it. And while I disagree with their ultimate analysis, I can certainly understand their horror. ...

When we criticize religion—just as when we criticize any other kind of idea—we do need to make sure that criticism of the idea doesn't turn into persecution of its adherents. We need to draw a careful line between criticizing ideas and marginalizing people. We need to remember that people who disagree with us are still people, deserving of basic compassion and respect.

But we need to draw that line with every kind of idea. Political, scientific, artistic ideas – all of them. And we don't exempt any other kind of idea from criticism, just because that kind of idea has often been targeted with persecution.

Why should religion be any different?

Why should religion be treated any differently from

any other kind of idea about the world? Why, alone among all other ideas, should it be protected from criticism, questions, mockery when it's ridiculous, excoriation when it's appalling? Why, alone among all other ideas, should we not try to persuade people out of it if we think it's mistaken?

Why should religion be the exception?

I've asked this question more times than I can remember. And I've only ever gotten one straight answer. In one argument on Facebook ... the person I was debating argued that religious debates and disagreements have a bad history. All too often, they've led to hostility, hatred, tribalism, bigotry, even violence and wars. Therefore, he argued, it was best to just avoid debates about the topic altogether.

You know what? He's right. When it comes to the divisiveness of religion, he's totally right.

And that's an argument for my side — not his.

I completely agree with his basic assessment. Religion does tend to be more divisive than other topics. It's a point Daniel Dennett made in his book, *Breaking the Spell*: in a weird but very real psychological paradox, people tend to defend ideas more ferociously when we don't have very good evidence supporting them.

Look at it this way. If people come over the hill and tell us that the sky is orange, we can clearly see that the sky is blue, so we can easily shrug off their ridiculous idea, and we don't feel a powerful need to defend our own perception. But if people come over the hill and tell us that God comes in three parts, one of whom is named Jesus, and this three-in-one god really wants us not to eat meat on Fridays — and we think there is no god but Allah, and he really wants us to never eat pork or draw pictures of real things — we don't have any way to settle the disagreement.

The only evidence supporting our belief is, "My parents tell me", "My religious leader tells me", "My holy book tells me", or "I feel it in my heart". And if we care about our belief — if it's not some random trivial opinion, if it's central to our personal and social identity — we have a powerful tendency to double down, to entrench ourselves more deeply and more passionately in our belief. We can't have a rational, evidence-based debate about the matter. The only way to defend our own belief is with bigotry, tribalism, and violence.

But if religious differences really are more likely to lead to bigotry, tribalism, violence, etc., doesn't that show what a bad idea it is? If the ideas of religion are so poorly rooted in reality that there's no way to resolve differences other than forming battle lines and screaming or shooting across them, doesn't that strongly suggest that this is a truly crappy idea, and humanity should let go of it? Doesn't that suggest that persuading people out of it is a really good thing to do?

So yeah. This wasn't such a great answer. But at least it was an answer. At least it wasn't a changing of the topic, a moving of the goalposts, a deterioration into personal insult, a complete abandonment of the conversation altogether. Every other time that I've asked, "Why should religion, alone among all other kinds of ideas, be free from attempts

to persuade people out of it?" I've been met with what was essentially silence.

I've gotten tremendous hostility over the years for my attempts to persuade people out of religion. I've been called a racist and a cultural imperialist, trying to stamp out the beautiful tapestry of human diversity and make everyone in the world exactly like me. I've been called a fascist, have been compared to Stalin and Glenn Beck. My atheist activism has been compared to the genocide of the Native Americans. I've even been called "evil in one of its purest forms" — as have many other atheist writers; I'm hardly the only target of this.

All this, for trying to persuade people that their idea is mistaken, and our idea is correct. The atheism itself gets hostile opposition as well, of course: it gets called immoral, amoral, hopeless, meaningless, joyless, and more. But the very idea of presuming to engage in this debate — the very idea of putting religion on one side of a chessboard and atheism on the other, and seeing which one gets checkmated — is regularly treated as a bigoted and intolerant violation of the basic principles of human discourse.

And yet when I ask why — why it's okay to persuade people out of other ideas but not this one, why religion alone should be exempt from the vigorous criticism that every other idea is expected to stand up to, why religion alone should get a free ride in the marketplace of ideas, why religion should be the sole exception — I've only ever gotten one crappy answer, one time.

Does anyone have a better answer? Any answer?

THE "TRUE UNBELIEVER"

Paul Kurtz

Do fundamentalist theists have their atheist counterparts? Alistair McGrath, a Christian theologian, used the word *fundamentalist* to describe certain kinds of atheists. A fundamentalist is a person who is committed to a set of basic beliefs or doctrines with dogmatic and inflexible loyalty.

The word originally applied to Protestant fundamentalists who interpreted the Bible literally and would brook no criticism of it. Their beliefs included the inerrancy of Scripture, belief in the virgin birth of Jesus and his resurrection, and the eternal salvation of those who believe in him. The word was subsequently applied to so-called Islamic fundamentalists, who are so committed to the Qur'an that they tolerate no deviation from their understanding of it. They are all too willing to use violence to impose its commandments on others. Fundamentalists typically loathe doubters or dissenters. Witness the intolerant Protestant-Catholic wars of the early modern period. It is worth noting that despite their often-harsh rhetoric, the Christian fundamentalists of today no longer display this level of intense hatred.

In any belief system, a fundamentalist is one so overcome by zeal that he or she will never bend: that is, "a true believer." We have seen extreme illustrations of this in the Puritan heresy trials, inquisitions, witch hunts, and

fierce campaigns against sin. Practices like these no longer occur in Christian countries, though “the virtue police” are regrettably still active in many Muslim societies.

We need to ask: *Are there fundamentalist “true unbelievers”?* Many secular-atheists in twentieth-century totalitarian societies were indeed fundamentalists in the sense that they sought to impose a strict ideological code and willingly used state power and brutal violence against anyone who dissented. *Stalinism* is the best example of the readiness to punish deviation in the name of “the holy secular doctrine”, which the commissars in the gulags used to enforce obedience. Fortunately, the extremes of this doctrinal terror have declined with the end of the cold war.

Nonetheless, there still lingers among some *true unbelievers* an unflinching conviction toward atheism—God does not exist, *period*; they are convinced of that! This kind of dogmatic attitude holds that *this and only this is true* and that anyone who deviates from it is a fool. This insults a great number of reflective believers.

John Dewey, the noted American philosopher, observed [in *A Common Faith*] that:

The aggressive atheist seems to have something in common with traditional superstition.... The exclusive preoccupation of both militant atheism and supernaturalism is with man in isolation from nature.

This form of militant atheism is often truncated and narrow-minded. It does not appreciate the cosmic setting of the human species in the nature of things. It lacks any “natural piety”, said Dewey, and it is not concerned with the humanist values that ought to accompany the rejection of theism.

The New Atheists, in my view, have made an important contribution to the contemporary cultural scene because they have opened religious claims to public examination—for religion often was considered immune to criticism. Moreover, most atheists that I know are decent and compassionate folk. What I object to are the militant atheists who are narrow-minded about religious persons and will have nothing to do with agnostics, skeptics, or those who are indifferent to religion, dismissing them as cowardly.

Eric Hoffer used the term *true believer* to refer to religious fanatics. There is an analogous “true unbeliever” syndrome among some atheists who, I submit, are intolerant of those who hold differing views.

Science writer Nicholas Wade pointed this out in his *New York Times* review (October 11, 2009) of Richard Dawkins’s excellent new book, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*:

This brings me to the intellectual flaw...in Dawkins’ otherwise eloquent paean to evolution: he has let himself slip into being as dogmatic as his opponents... condemning the doubters of evolution as “history deniers” who are “worse than ignorant” and “deluded to the point of perversity!” This is not the language of science or civility.

I think that Wade has overstated his case. After all, atheism has not had a fair hearing in contemporary society,

where believers have dominated the public square.

Dawkins and the other New Atheists are to be congratulated for their efforts to redress this imbalance. Yet Wade’s point needs to be appreciated: one should exercise restraint in attacking one’s opponents. Atheism, like agnosticism and skepticism, can be a dignified posture when it is based on careful reflection and civilly expressed. It should not be mean-spirited. Many of us prefer a kinder and gentler form of secular humanism.

PASTOR CHARLES WORLEY MAKES HIS LOGIC-DEFYING BID FOR THE DUMBTH AWARD

In selecting SHSNY’s Dumbth-of-the-Year candidates, we look for humor as well as cluelessness, but Pastor Charles Worley of the Providence Road Baptist Church in Maiden, North Carolina, earns his nomination on the basis of pure, mean-spirited stupidity.



Worley, who first came to national attention in 1978 with a sermon in which he lamented that, “Forty years ago, they would’ve hung ‘em [homosexuals]—bless God—from a white oak tree”, and whose church is now the subject of an IRS investigation, in May offered this stupefying “solution” to the “homosexual problem” in America:

“I figured a way out to get rid of all the lesbians and queers. ... Build a great, big, large fence -- 150 or 100 mile long -- put all the lesbians in there ... Do the same thing for the queers and the homosexuals and have that fence electrified so they can’t get out ... and you know what, in a few years, they’ll die out ... do you know why? They can’t reproduce!”

One can only wonder what color the sky is in Pastor Worley’s world.

THE ITALIAN DETECTIVE’S WIFE ON WHEN TO TRUST THE CLERGY’S TRUTHFULNESS

Donna Leon

[In *Drawing Conclusions, the 20th Commissario Guido Brunetti mystery, the Venetian detective has just told his wife, Paola, he thinks that a nun he interviewed in a suspicious death investigation withheld information.* - JR]

Guido”, she said with patience, “there doesn’t exist the cleric you think capable of telling the simple truth.”

“That’s not true ... there have been some.”

“Some”, she repeated.

“You’ve never trusted them, either”, he added.

“Of course I don’t trust them. But I don’t question them in situations where people might lie: dead people or what might have killed them. I discuss the weather with them when I meet them at my parents’ place. The rain is an especially fascinating topic: too much or too little.”

“And do you trust them when they talk about the weather?” he asked.

“If I’m near a window and look outside.”

FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM

Chic Schissel

I think John Rafferty's summary of Daniel Dennett's argument for free will (June PIQUE, "The Best Short-Form Argument for Free Will I've Ever Heard") doesn't actually apply to free will.

You can say that you can make a conscious brain out of non-conscious neurons, but that doesn't illustrate free will. You can't make a tooth out of a non-conscious neuron; the neuron doesn't have free will, it can't become whatever it wants to.

Years ago, at Queens College in a Contemporary Civilization course, I delivered a small talk on free will that the professor told me was "very interesting" (I still remember his exact words from some 65 years ago). I don't recall if I ever sent it to you, but here it is:

"The question is often raised whether free will really exists. Assuming the universality of mechanistic physical laws, the claim is made that reason must lead us to absolute determinism; therefore we cannot be truly responsible for our behavior. In an absolute sense this may be right, but on humanity's level of understanding this is not useful.

"When two dice are thrown we notice that different numbers come up, and we conclude that the dice have free will. But continued observations show that the dice exhibit a pattern: the number 7 comes up more frequently than other numbers, and 6 and 8 show up more than 5 and 9. So, then, we decide that the free will behavior of the dice is limited, restricted by something we call probability.

"Now, if we go further, if we measure the coefficient of friction of the dice, the recoil characteristics of the dice table and the rebound panel, the sweat in the palm of our dice-throwing hand, the force of the throw, every absolute physical characteristic of every physical factor involved, we could absolutely predict what number will come up, and the dice will have lost all attributes of free will.

"But we can't even adequately measure the physical data involved in a crap game, let alone the initial direction and amplitude of the energy of the big bang. So we have to be satisfied with probability, and this is the level at which science operates. And, as a corollary, it leaves us with the troubling concept that we, at least to some extent, have free will and are responsible for our behavior."

SOMETIMES WE DO IT RIGHT ...

To the Editor: The new (June) PIQUE is a joy, as always, full of terrific stuff – but my favorite piece is your "Faith, Belief, and Knowledge: Defining Our Terms" – well done (again)!
– Phil Appleman

To the Editor: Re: "Faith, Belief and Knowledge: Defining Our Terms" (PIQUE, June), you invite reader emendations, adaptations, and challenges. I happily accept the invitation.

Your definitions of "faith" and "knowledge" are essentially in line with the dictionary. Not so with your take on "belief". You seem to define belief as truth*, based on

evidence and/or experience. But evidence can be faulty, and experience can be misinterpreted. "Belief" is opinion, not necessarily truth. You say "belief" and "faith" contradict each other. But belief can be, and too often is, based on faith, while "truth" cannot reliably be based on faith.

You say you intend to use these definitions "in dialogue and in these pages". But in these same pages are several contradictions of your definition of "belief". A couple of examples from this same PIQUE of belief not associated with truth: 1) "Not knowing is much more interesting than believing an answer that might be wrong." – Richard Feynman (page 8); and 2) "Believers in the supernatural ..." – Walter Balcerak (page 9).** – Chic Schissel

*Sorry, Chic, but, no I don't. I said "Belief is an expectation of truth based on evidence and/or experience", not truth.

**First, neither example contradicts my definitions. And even if they did, those usages would be Feynman's and Balcerak's, not mine. – JR

To the Editor: Is the statement "There is no God!" a statement of faith, belief or truth? – Ray Stone, Santa Barbara

Ray: Good question. But it has to be faith, because there is no evidence or experience to prove that there is no god – the old conundrum of the impossibility of proving a negative. – JR

To the Editor: I certainly enjoyed the reprint of Michael Shermer's *Scientific American* column (PIQUE, June, "Much Ado About Nothing") on my favorite Big Question: "Why is there something rather than nothing". I've gotten pretty far in answering Other Big Questions ("Does God exist?", "What is the purpose of life?", "How can Free Will exist in a universe that's either predetermined or random?"), but I've never gotten anywhere with this one.

Trouble is, I don't think Shermer has either. The observation that "nothing" is an unstable state according to quantum mechanics is an interesting observation, but it doesn't answer the question, "Why is there quantum mechanics rather than nothing?"

Shermer gives us a batch of fascinating possible answers to How there is something rather than nothing, but in the end I don't think science is very useful for answering Why in its purest sense. – Harvey Wachtel

To the Editor: After reading Greta Christina's "Why Does Religion Always Get a Free Ride?" [PIQUE, June – see page 8 for Part 2], it seems to me the answer lies in the fact that for some people religion provides hope -- sometimes in an otherwise hopeless situation.

I am not a theist, but I can see that the concept of a God is essential to some people and to deny them that concept is like taking away a life preserver from a person in the ocean who would otherwise drown. Religion gives those in distress hope that things will be better, hope to the miserable when nothing else will. Religion is different.

Hope is also why great works of music and art, and architecture have been created; persons of faith hope their present life, and/or their afterlife, will be better, and/or that

they will somehow be rewarded for their good works.

Religion offers hope where it is needed, so perhaps that is why religion is different. – *Giles Kelly, Washington, D.C.*

To the Editor: I read your article (“A Shanda”) in June PIQUE about the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish abuse of children and I am thoroughly glad you had the time and the ability to articulate this delicate subject!

Religion never trumps the law and abuse from anyone, anywhere, cannot be tolerated and should be exposed! Thanks for your report on this topic. – *Edith Amster*

To the Editor: Congratulations on the great article (“A Shanda”) in June PIQUE. I followed your advice and sent a letter to the governor. For some reason, my computer won’t download a copy of it, but the jist of it was that as a person of Jewish origin, I was particularly offended by the actions of these characters in Brooklyn who might be associated with my own ethnicity. – *Al Henick*

To the Editor: I can’t believe that PIQUE keeps getting better each year. The latest issue was most interesting to us on the Left Coast for we have very little contact with the Hasidim. It appears that Orthodox Jewry has unbreakable ties to the political machines in NYC that can’t be questioned lest the epithet “anti-Semitic” be used.

What an eye-opening disclosure to us naive citizens here in Santa Barbara. Other articles in the issue are fascinating and we thank you for publishing them. We had Greta Christina speak to our Society last month and Barbara

Forrest this, both of whom received standing ovations.

I especially liked John’s “definitions” (“Faith, Belief, and Knowledge: Defining Our Terms”) which we would like to use in our monthly *Secular Circular**.

My wife, a Norwegian, raised her fist and a big-yelled YES when she read of the “excommunication” of the Church of Norway.

All in all a great issue, one of the best I’ve read. Keep up the excellent work. – *Dick Cousineau, President, Humanist Society of Santa Barbara*

**Absolutely, Dick - I’m flattered.* – JR

... AND SOMETIMES WE GET IT WRONG

(Excerpted from Humanist Monthly, newsletter of the Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society, June, 2012)

Last month there was an outpouring on numerous websites of outraged commentary under such headlines as “Tennessee Bans ‘Handholding’ For Kids, Says it’s ‘a Gateway to Sexual Activity’”.

The problem is the law makes no mention of handholding or kissing. In 1636 words it speaks of “sexual risk avoidance through abstinence ... understand(ing) how sexual activity affects the whole person ... the unique challenges that single teen parents encounter ... the interrelationship between teen sexual activity and exposure to other risk behaviors”, etc.

That’s it. No more. Apparently even liberals can go off half-cocked* (so to speak). – *Dick McMahan, Editor*

*Including the Editor of June PIQUE, viz: “Why We Live in New York #93”, repeating the “handholding ban” nonsense.

Mea maxima culpa. – JR]

Page 8

Legalize Pot Now!

Page 3

Physics Vs. Philosophy

Page 2

Genetic Morality?

Page 1

The 4th of July and
Our Founding Convicts

Secular Humanist
Society of New York
FDR Station
PO Box 7661
New York, NY
10150-7661

