

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

August, 2006

In this unusual August issue (no July instead of no August – don't ask) we attack *left-wing* attacks on science; revisit the varieties of unbelief; assess teen sex in America; mock Georgia congressmen, Christian baseball, Bush's Supremes and Brooklyn *mohels*; unmask the Intelligent Designer, and reveal the guaranteed-true genealogy of Jesus's (close to home) guaranteed-real family.

But we start with life lessons learned—from two of the great humanists—
by two of our own. — JR

DARWIN'S EXAMPLE

Philip Appleman

(Reprinted from The Humanist, May/June, 2006)

Charles Darwin, after many years of hard work and illness, controversy and honor, lay on his deathbed. A biographer tells us: "During the night of April 18th [1882], about a quarter to twelve, he had a severe attack and passed into a faint, from which he was brought back to consciousness with great difficulty.

"He seemed to recognize the approach of death, and said, 'I am not the least afraid to die.'" His last words.

Living among the relentless Victorian pieties, educated to be a clergyman, surrounded by threats of literal burning hellfire: why didn't Darwin fear death? Part of the answer is that by the time he was a mature man, he simply knew too much about the real world to be frightened by superstitions. The once orthodox Cambridge undergraduate had, he wrote, "gradually come ... to see that the Old Testament, from its manifestly false history of the world, with the Tower of Babel, the rainbow as a sign, etc., etc., and from its attributing to God the feelings of a revengeful tyrant, was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos or the beliefs of any barbarian."

Another reason Darwin didn't fear death and hellfire is that he could not take seriously religious threats that were openly sadistic. "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true: for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that [those] who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother, and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."

Throughout his adult life, Darwin took a deep human satisfaction in his important work, in the comradeship of his friends, and in the love of his family. That was enough, and he was not merely content with it; ill though he often was, he was a happy man.

And he was not afraid to die.

Death, Darwin knew, is simply a natural part of a natural process. Death is always out there, waiting: only its timing is in doubt. Eventually we will have played our small part in the great system of nature, and have passed on, leaving the system intact. We are a part of nature, just as tigers or termites are.

Priests and preachers in most religions refuse to accept this sensible view of things. “Eternal Life,” they cry – thus thwarting all hope of a mature personal philosophy. By promising glory in a glittering but unreal eternity, they sour our satisfactions in a brief but genuine present. They portray a God who supposedly plans all things reasonably and wisely. After all, if we are reasonable, surely God must be supremely reasonable.

Our bodies, we are told, are temples, so we treat them with respect and look forward to our promised threescore and ten years. But God, it turns out, has something else in mind for us, and eventually we find out that God is not only unreasonable; he is also a vandal: after years of our taking good care of our tidy little temples, God suddenly and without explanation breaks down the door, smashes the windows, rips the paintings, and slashes the furniture. All of our lives we have been prudent: about diet, about drinking and smoking, about doing everything in moderation – and all of a sudden, without any warning at all, God shrieks in our ear: Cancer!

But what if you are not religious when cancer slips up without warning, threatening death? You do not fear death, any more than Darwin did; but you hate it. You hate the loss, and the sorrow of leaving behind bereaved family and friends. So in your mind, and in the minds of those who love you, there is a sharp pain, a conscious rage at being mortal. Ants and alligators must also die, but they do not face that fact with rage or regret; those thoughts and feelings are human.

Religion says: console yourself, there will be another chance, another life. Two things are wrong with this: first, there is not a shred of evidence for it; and second, it is a sop, consciously intended to blunt our rage and regret, thus dehumanizing us. Our anger at death testifies to the value of life; our sorrow for family and friends testifies to our devotion. Every noble quality we possess takes on a more poignant value because of our natural brevity. Our final pain is mortal, and our own; we hate it, but we do not want it cheapened by the seductions of an alleged immortality.

Face to face with death, we realize: the meaning of life is inside our lives, not outside them. We cannot impose on our experience a meaningfulness that we have not ourselves built into it. Our true philosophy of life is whatever we choose to do from moment to moment. If we regularly behave honestly and decently to those around us, then our philosophy is clearly a healthy and adaptive one, accounting for our lives in terms of our whole social environment. The sum-total of our actions at a given time constitutes our philosophy of life.

Darwin on his deathbed could look back at forty-three years of devotion to a loving wife, forty-five years of devotion to a grand idea. At the end, he had one characteristic regret: that he could not somehow have lived two lives, so that one could have been spent in full-time philanthropic work. The mind is tyrannically ambitious; the flesh cannot keep pace with it. Still, Darwin was content: he had made his commitments, and he had kept them. In an often hostile and bewildering world, he had lived honestly and decently: Darwin understood that that is the only “heaven” we will ever know. And it is the only one we need.

Ed: Phil Appleman, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana U., is the editor of Darwin (a SHSNY Book Club selection this fall), and a long-time member of SHSNY.

It may be that ministers really think that their prayers do good, and it may be that frogs imagine that their croaking brings spring.

— Robert Ingersoll

THE COSMOS SERIES

Samuel Milligan

I don't feel it to be an exaggeration to say that one of the most important events of my life was the premiere run of Carl Sagan's television series, *Cosmos*, in 1980. I was 48 at the time, still intent on living my life with next to no thought about the universe or my place in it. *Cosmos* changed all that, furnishing my mind with beautiful and haunting images that occupy it to this day, and which I can reinforce by periodically watching the re-mastered series on DVD or reading the accompanying book. Images that show the awe-filled wonder of the world I live in and make me realize that the universe can stand on its own merits without needing anything so unnecessary as religion to make it meaningful.

And while religion was not important or interesting to me at the time, the series furnished me with a guard against it ever becoming so.

Because his death took me by surprise, my fan letter never got written, and so I am unable to thank him directly. All I can do to express my gratitude is try to show others what I have learned about the staggeringly beautiful cosmos we live in. But the cosmos as it truly is, not cluttered with superstitious misinformation. Sagan's cosmos, in fact.

In preparation for writing this, I looked over a few websites about the series. One in particular was filled with several pages of letters from people who had been deeply affected by the show. Many saw it as young people and were influenced to find subsequent careers in science. I was pleased to learn that.

But as for me, *Cosmos* sent me in another direction. I was very impressed with what Sagan had to say about the early Greek beginnings of science. Empedocles, Thales, Aristarchus of Samos, Eratosthenes of Alexandria and especially Democritus of Abdera who would become one of my particular heroes, along with Epicurus and his Roman disciple Lucretius, prompting trips to Greece and Italy to find, for instance, the Athenian neighborhood (Melite) where Epicurus had his famous teaching garden, any real traces of which are now buried several meters deep under the modern city. (Which is OK—they're safe there.) Or to look across the Attic plain at a limestone outcropping called Lycabettos hill and know that Democritus doubtless had looked at it over two thousand years before, when it was still inhabited by its eponymous wolves. Or Herculaneum, which was home to the important Epicurean writer Philodemus of Gadara. (That's right—the same Gadara where the luckless pigs had the misfortune to run into Jesus. See Mark 5:13 for the lurid climax.)

All my infatuation with the classical world and its contemporary remnants had its genesis in *Cosmos*.

In time I would read most of those books by Sagan that are directed to the general reader. *Broca's Brain*, *Billions & Billions*, *Small Blue Dot* and *The Demon-Haunted World* being those that I remember in particular. And the more he influenced me, the better person I became, reinforcing the humanist system of ethics that I had previously acquired from Confucianism, as well as developing new ideas such as a real feeling of responsibility for the care of the planet we live on (which worldview the Confucianists implied but never expressed directly).

And while my scorn for religious institutions has deepened, my solicitude for religious people has deepened as well. Solicitude tempered, of course, with the painfully

sharp awareness of how dangerous those people often are, and how dangerous they will remain until taught reason.

Teaching is the key word here.

For Sagan was, most importantly, a great teacher. To acquire scientific knowledge is critically important, but unless the community at large is taught the value of the endeavor, lack of support will grind progress to a halt. And that progress is essential for our survival. Humanity must rise above its brutish instincts, and only science can help us do that, religion having made the attempt and been found wanting. So not only Sagan, but those of us who come after him, must do what we can to educate everyone to the dangers that we face as well as the answers that can be found in approaching those problems with an inquiring, logical mind.

Spreading an awareness of those dangers has now become even more imperative. We are capable of blowing the human race into extinction, unfairly taking the rest of the planet with us, and we have seen the rise of a religious fanaticism that, believing in the mirage of a future reward, is entirely willing to do so. Education in the kind of clarity of thought that science brings has never been more needed than now.

Unfortunately, Sagan died too young, and we must make do without his powerful presence, but we can use his information, principles and example to direct us in the work immediately ahead. There are countless people out there who can and must be redeemed from their superstition. And we have no time to waste.

THE JACKSON POLLOCK CODE

George Rowell

John Rafferty's article in June PIQUE about "The Da Vinci Code" is right; we should go see it for laughs. It's just light cinematic fiction that hurts nobody.

The truth is much more interesting. My family, the Rowells, are direct descendants of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. We do not boast about it, however. Our real worry is a Jackson Pollock painting. We are worried that somebody will write a revelatory book about us called The Jackson Pollock Code. More on that later.

Our genealogy is straightforward. After Jesus got off the cross in that photo-op (actually, it was called a myth-op then), he married Mary Magdalene and they moved to the south of France.

Their oldest son later became a founder of the Merovingian Dynasty. Since the Merovingians were a Germanic tribe and invaded France from the north, his accession to the Merovingian kingship is a little confusing, but I am sure data will turn up to confirm it. Their younger son moved to Normandy. Little is written about him. But he became a knight, and his descendants came to England with William the Conqueror and established the Rowell family.

[head-shot picture of Jesus. Caption: The First Rowell]

No picture was ever made of Jesus in his lifetime; all depictions of him are idealized images from painters' imaginations. But I can tell you what he looked like: he had a long, sharp nose, buck teeth (unless he had orthodontic work), and a weak chin. Just like the Rowells.

We are sure of this because of an amazing find in the south of France—the tomb of Jesus and Mary Magdalene has been found! (The find was confirmed in an obscure archeological journal, so few people read about it.) Jesus's big toes were found

mummified, and his DNA extracted. To the surprise of no one in my family, his DNA matched ours—*proof* that we are his descendants!

[head-shot picture of George Rowell. Caption: 21st Century Rowell]

One group helping us to conceal our line is the secret Ipod Dei society. They generally wear red and white-striped pants, a purple cape embroidered with sunflowers, and a chartreuse hood, while pink wrap-around sunglasses mask their identity. We have cautioned them not to use violence in protecting us (the Rowells never kill anyone unless it's absolutely necessary), and that we will continue our good deeds and piety out of the public eye.

But what gives us away is the halo that appears over our heads after we have done a good deed, such as taking out the garbage. Rowell women have the halo, too, of course, but it looks more appealing because their hair is long and combed down. If their hair is piled high, the halo can get stuck sideways and look terribly messy.

Which brings us to the Pollock painting (I will not say which). Some of its drippings reveal much too much about the Rowells, and we are afraid that someone will write a book called "The Jackson Pollock Code," which would bring us to the attention of the world. I am writing this for PIQUE because I know secular humanists would not give away our family secret.

As you can see, fact is much stranger than fiction. So go see "The DaVinci Code" with a clear conscience.

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION CHAMPIONS FREEDOM AROUND THE GLOBE ... JUST NOT HERE

John Rafferty

On May 15, the FBI admitted that it is increasingly seeking reporters' phone records in leak investigations. "It used to be very hard and complicated to do this," a senior federal official told abcnews.com, "but it no longer is in the Bush administration."

Why was it once "very hard" to do? Because of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ...

*Congress shall make no law ... abridging
the freedom of speech, or of the press ...*

... and the Fourth Amendment:

*The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers,
and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be
violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause,
supported by Oath or affirmation... .*

Weren't they quaint? Don't you almost wish we still lived by those rules?

Update: In a further gutting of the Fourth Amendment, the Bush Supreme Court on June 15 effectively killed the "knock and announce" rule that prevented police armed with a warrant from simply crashing down your front door without giving you ten seconds to put your pants on. Yes, the police *should* announce themselves, Antonin Scalia wrote in the 5-4 majority opinion, but even if they don't, any evidence they collect in the subsequent illegal search is valid and can be used in court. Why? Because, original-intent/strict-constructionist Scalia argued, police are better trained now and conditions have changed.

Besides, those whose homes have been violated can always sue the cops in civil court. Yeah, right.

So “the sanctity of a man’s home and the privacy of life,” as dissenting Justice Breyer wrote—a principle of law that dates back to 13th-century Britain and to a landmark 1914 U.S. Supreme Court ruling—is another “quaint” concept tossed aside by the reactionary ideologues of the Bush Court.

Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all his laws. — *John Adams*

ATHEISM & AGNOSTICISM

Chic Schissel

Doug Thomas, in June PIQUE, complains that atheists attack agnostics because they are “soft” on theism. I propose to provide a monumental service to humanists: settling this conflict by simply re-defining a few words.

First, some classic definitions.

Science is a method of arriving at relative truth based on evidence that meets sharply defined criteria, and the relative knowledge so obtained.

Atheism is the belief that there is no god or gods.

Agnosticism holds that the ultimate cause (god) and the essential nature of things are unknown and unknowable. The agnostic is willing to say, “I don’t know.”

Atheism is a scientific posture, sustained by the fact that there is no valid evidence supporting the existence of any god. But, Thomas reminds us, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

However, science is not written in stone and responds to new information. Science relies on probability, not certainty, and absence of evidence, while not evidence of absence, is indeed evidence of a high probability of absence. That is why we believe in the law of gravity. And that is why atheists firmly reject the idea of a god.

The word “firmly” represents the difference between the agnostic and the atheist. To eliminate this difference, and end all the bloodshed, I presume to re-define the terms:

Atheist: someone who firmly denies the existence of any god that, up to now, has been described. This is subject to revision in response to any future valid information.

Agnostic: exactly the same.

GOD TALK AMONG THE UNBELIEVERS

Bill Lindley

I just love God-talk among unbelievers, as in the several articles on various kinds of unbelief in the June issue of PIQUE. I have a few tricks of the God-talk trade, for which I claim no originality, that the authors seem to have overlooked.

First, my late friend Al Ames, a staunch atheist, when asked “Do you believe in God?” would retort “Which God?” making it clear that the other question was unanswerable without a little more clarity.

I use Al’s question in self-labeling. If you’re talking about the Lord God Jehovah, I’m an atheist – as George H. Smith put it, an agnostic atheist, although the Jehovah model is so preposterous that it’s hard to “stay on the fence.” (See Exodus 33:23, “The moon over Mt. Sinai” for an example.) But if you’re talking about a pantheist God —

“God is the universe” or “God is everything,” then I’m a believer, except I don’t like to use the G-word. If you’re talking about the Holy Trinity, I don’t believe it. I explain it thus: The Third Person of the Trinity begat the Second Person of the Trinity, but the First Person of the Trinity is the Father (Bible citations available on request). Who can believe that? Millions do. And so on.

About Doug Thomas’s article, I find one fault: he has ignored or overlooked oxymoronic models of God. These can be dismissed with apodictical certainty, being independent of empirical evidence one way or the other. Several such models are believed in fervently by millions if not billions of people (yes, that many have taken leave of their senses). One is “the male person who invented gender,” the standard Jehovah model, extending to most updates. Another is “the omnipotent, benevolent creator of this universe,” which requires empirical evidence about the nature of the universe, and poses a problem quite familiar to theologians – the problem of evil. I encourage Mr. Thomas to read Michael Martin’s book, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, which examines oxymoronic models of God at length.

I agree with Mr. Martin, as opposed to Yann Martell, that agnostics are not the least bit wishy-washy. They are, he expresses with joy, firm in their claim to know that the proposition “God exists” is undecidable.

I was pleased, too, to hear from Jane D. that there is A.A. for non-believers. It must be a nonstandard A.A., since the orthodox version requires the recovering alcoholic to rely on a Higher Power. In the copyrighted boilerplate for the 12-step process, the male personal pronoun is used four times in reference to the Higher Power. This reminds me of Henry Ford’s saying: You may have a Ford car in any color you want, as long as it is black. Similarly, in A.A. you may have any Higher Power you wish, just so long as it’s a male person.

HELP ME UNDERSTAND

Russell Dunn

If Heaven is such a wonderful place, then why do we spend our entire lives trying to avoid getting there? If God is all good, then how is it that he kills more people through natural disasters and pathogens in one year than all the wars and atrocities committed by humans?

Why is it that when things go right, people thank God, but when things go wrong, others get the blame?

Why do people pray, but accept any outcome—no matter how wretched or devoid of meaning—as a manifestation of God’s divine will and mercy?

Why do large numbers of Americans reject evolution, and yet rush to their physicians to receive the newest inoculation to fight off the latest strain of evolving microbes?

Why is proving your irrationality by believing in God a prerequisite for seeking political office?

How “sacred” can human life be if God permits millions of fertilized eggs to miscarry, billions of unfertilized eggs to be flushed out of the human body, and trillions of spent sperm to swim purposelessly until they die? And how do birth defects fit into God’s divine plan?

**TEN YEARS AFTER
“JUST SAY NO” TO TEEN SEX**

JoAnn Wypijewski

(Excerpted from “The Way of All Flesh” in Mother Jones, July/August 2006)

Twenty months [after firing Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders for urging real sex education in schools] Bill Clinton signed the welfare reform act, with a subsection that narrowed the range of discussable sexual subjects in federally funded schools to the propositions that “a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of sexual activity,” that “sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical side effects,” that the only thing students need know about condoms and birth control is their failure rate, and that, given all the above, queer kids may proceed straight to hell.

Ten years and \$1 billion later, this is the only national sex education policy in America. Research on its effectiveness is scarce, but not a single peer-reviewed study shows abstinence-only training has any impact on the age at which teenagers renounce their virginity. ... The “virginity pledge,” has been uttered by 2.5 million teens, and its numerology insults it: 88 percent of virginity pledgers have sex before marriage; on average they have it 18 months later than non-pledgers but are more likely to have unprotected sex and less likely to seek treatment for sexually transmitted diseases; 9 million STDs occur each year among teens and young adults, and rates among those who’ve vowed to “Just Say No” are comparable with rates among others. Religious teens are less likely to have sex before they’re 18, but this particular survey defined “sex” the way Bill Clinton does, as “heterosexual vaginal intercourse.” ...

Compared with teenagers in almost every other developed country, American teens have more religion, more partners, shorter relationships, less contraceptive use, more infections, more abortions, more babies.

**AND MORE THAN TEN YEARS AFTER
“DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL” IN THE MILITARY ...**

The Pentagon classified homosexuality as a mental defect akin to retardation.

**YOU CAN’T THINK THAT!
THE TWO-FRONT WAR ON SCIENCE**

John Rafferty

On many occasions herein we have lampooned or simply condemned the assault on science and, indeed, on reason itself by right-wing religious fundamentalists and the politicians in the Bush administration and in Congress who pander to them. But let’s face it, decrying right wingers in these pages is like preaching to the choir. *(Um, poor choice of cliché metaphor for this readership; let’s say it’s like striking out the pitcher.)*

Most secular humanists are liberal or liberal-ish (*pace*, Libertarians, I said “most”), egalitarian, in tune with contemporary feminism and the gay rights movement, and non-racist. And perhaps most importantly, “*We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems*”—the first Affirmation of Humanism. Therefore, we humanists should defend

science against attacks from the politically-correct left just as vigorously as we do those from the know-nothing right.

Yet where is the humanist, rationalist outrage when the president of Harvard is vilified by fundamentalist feminists, condemned by a spineless faculty, and loses his job because he suggested that the lack of proportional representation of women in the sciences might not— *might* not—be the result of discrimination alone, that *maybe* research should be done to find out if, *possibly*, there is a genetic gender difference regarding the mental processing of scientific information? How is that kind of censorship different from right-wing zealots preventing NASA scientists from discussing global warming?

For decades some gay activists have decried any research into a possible genetic basis of homosexuality, even though most geneticists believe such studies would only prove there is no such thing as a “gay gene.” Never mind, don’t even think about it. And woe—including high-decibel charges of bigotry—to any institution that would underwrite such research. Of course a genetic determinant *might* be found, and in the future prospective parents could screen for (and destroy) fetuses with the gay gene, a prospect that, understandably, infuriates some gays — and raises serious moral questions for us all. But deny science? Tell it “You can’t go there”? How is prohibiting basic research on genetic causation unlike prohibiting research on stem cells?

“Young black women with breast cancer were more likely than whites or older blacks to have a type of tumor with genetic traits that make it uncommonly lethal,” wrote columnist Denise O’Grady in *The New York Times* Health & Fitness section in June. But many readers would not buy “a biological difference linked to race,” O’Grady wrote in a follow-up column July 4, and instead insisted on socioeconomic explanations like disparities in money, education, stress, and access to health care. *Insisted*, and to hell with statistics.

Sure, social factors are important in medical research, maybe even more important than the elusive and easily-abused concept of race. But we know that there are some important racial differences in the way people react to various medicines. We know also that sickle cell anemia is more common among, and more fatal to black men, and that “studies have linked certain genes to prostate cancer in black men, and other genes to the disease in whites ...” but “there is some hesitancy among researchers to wade into this field, for fear their views will be seen as inflammatory, or misconstrued.” In other words, genetic research based on racial differences is *prima facie* evidence of racism. How is that different from calling human stem cell research “murder”?

And if some would stifle research that might suggest ethnic “inferiority,” others worry about perceived “superiority.” Steven Pinker, in “Groups and Genes: The lessons of the Ashkenazim,” in the June 26 *The New Republic*, summarized the already-well-known proposal of a team of University of Utah researchers: “that Ashkenazi Jews have a genetic advantage in intelligence, and that the advantage arose from natural selection for success in middleman occupations [perhaps genetically linked to] the genetic diseases known to be common among Ashkenazim, such as Tay-Sachs and Gaucher’s.

“The study quickly became a target of harsh denunciation,” Pinker says, but *something* has to explain all those Nobel Prizes. While the Utah team’s proposal of genetic advantage is far from proven, it has “provided *prima facie* evidence for each of

the [seven] hypotheses making up their theory ... [their] story meets the standards of a good scientific theory, though it is tentative and could turn out to be mistaken.”

But *should* the research be done? “Is it good for the Jews?” Pinker asks in the classic formulation. Or for “other middleman minorities, such as Armenians, Lebanese, Ibos, and overseas Chinese and Indians, who have also been targets of vicious persecution because of their economic success.” Perhaps worse, could such a study “lower people’s resistance to more invidious comparisons, such as groups who historically score lower, rather than higher, on IQ tests”?

Pinker’s answer is pure secular humanism.

“In recent decades, the standard response to claims of genetic differences has been to deny the existence of intelligence, to deny the existence of races and other genetic groupings, and to subject proponents to vilification, censorship, and at times physical intimidation. Aside from its effects on liberal discourse, the response is problematic. Reality is what refuses to go away when you do not believe in it, and progress in neuroscience and genomics has made these politically comforting shibboleths (such as the non-existence of intelligence and the non-existence of race) untenable.

“Rather than legislating facts, could we adopt a policy of agnosticism, and recommend that we ‘don’t go there’? Scientists routinely avoid research that may have harmful consequences, such as injuring human subjects or releasing dangerous microorganisms. The problem with this line of thought is that it would restrict research based on intellectual rather than physical conduct. Ideas are connected to other ideas, often in unanticipated ways, and restrictions on content could cripple freedom of inquiry and distort the intellectual landscape.”

Exactly.

AFTER FIVE INFECTIONS, A COMPROMISE

John Rafferty

The Bloomberg administration had knuckled under to the rabbis who insisted on continuing *metzitzah b’peh*, the practice of mouth-sucking a newly-circumcised baby’s penis clean of blood, even though one of their number had infected five infants with herpes, one of whom died, and another of whom is brain damaged (*PIQUE*, October, 2005, January, February ‘06). But health officials of New York State were not as easily cowed by the monolithic voting habits of the orthodox.

Loudmouth-in-Chief Rabbi David Niederman had infamously vowed, “We do not change, and we will not change.” But his gang of bearded old guys in black suits met in secret on several Sunday evenings this spring with Antonia Novello, New York State’s Health Commissioner, and reached a “compromise.”

From now on, if a baby is infected, the *mohel* who performed *metzitzah b’peh* will be prohibited from the practice until the source of the infection is determined. If he’s responsible, he must accept medical treatment. Even more important, all *mohels* who perform the rite must use a mouthwash of more than 25 percent alcohol, wipe their lips with an alcohol wipe, and wash their hands.

These guys have to be told to wash their hands?

MAYBE PITCHERS RATHER THAN PREACHERS

Marty Klein

(Excerpted from “Sexual Intelligence: Does Jesus Love Shortstops?” in Humanist Network News, July 12, 2006)

The latest institution to seize and abuse Christianity is Major League Baseball. The Colorado Rockies now acknowledge that they actively seek out Christians when acquiring new players. There are Bible quotes on locker room walls, prayer meetings, and a lack of girlie mags and rap music.

The Coors family (which founded and bankrolls the team and its stadium) has a long history of union-busting, anti-choice philanthropy, and racism (the Rockies currently have only two active black players). And yet the team has been explicitly looking for players with “character”—a word apparently limited to those who have accepted Jesus as their personal savior. ...

With major league baseball teams in Atlanta, Phoenix, Miami, and elsewhere increasingly scheduling Faith Days (complete with Christian music and testimonials), it’s getting hard to find a team to root for.

Ed: *But easier to find a team to root against. Does “Christian character” count? The Rockies are in last place in the National League West and have not had a winning record in eight years. And Atlanta, Phoenix, and Miami? As of mid-July, all three teams (Braves, Diamondbacks, Marlins) have losing records.*

Update: *Coors Chairman Pete Coors, extreme right-wing Senate candidate and star of Coors anti-drunk-driving commercials, has lost his driver’s license after being arrested July 12 in Golden, Colo. — for drunken driving.*

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #8

Steven Colbert, of Comedy Channel’s “The Colbert Report” (weeknights, 11:30) on June 14 interviewed freshman congressman Lynn A. Westmoreland, Republican of Georgia’s 8th District, whose website makes the proud claims that he protected a Fort Benning-based program (in his district) that trains the goon-squad security forces of right-wing dictators, and that he thinks it’s time the Voting Rights Act of 1965—which guaranteed African-Americans in Georgia the right to vote for the first time—be quietly put to sleep.

Colbert: We have a massive budget deficit right now. What can we get rid of to balance the budget?

Westmoreland: The Department of Education.

Colbert: You co-sponsored a bill requiring the display of the Ten Commandments in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Why was that important to you?

Westmoreland: Well, the Ten Commandments is not a bad thing for people to understand and respect. Where better place could you have something like that than in a judicial building or in a courthouse? ... I think if we’re totally without ‘em, we may lose our sense of direction.

Colbert: What are the Ten Commandments?

Westmoreland: What, all of them? Name them?

Colbert: Yeah, please.

Westmoreland: Um ... *(raising his eyes to heaven)* ... mm ... Don’t murder *(Colbert raises one finger)*. Don’t lie *(two fingers)*. Don’t steal *(three fingers)*. Uh ... *(biting his lips, then giving up)* ... I can’t name ‘em all.

Colbert: (*looking shocked, then smiling*) Congressman, thanks for taking time to come talk to me.

Westmoreland: (*smiling, absolutely clueless, shaking hands with Colbert*) Anytime.

Breaking News:

INTELLIGENT DESIGNER FOUND

(Based on an e-anecdote forwarded by Mike Tuchman)

Albuquerque, NM: Acting on tips from researchers in the fledgling science of Intelligent Design, federal law enforcement officials yesterday located and trapped the so-called “Intelligent Designer” in a Motel 6 just off U.S. Route 66 in the New Mexican desert.

The Intelligent Designer, identified as Phineas J. Schwartzfeld, a 57-year-old immigrant Swiss watchmaker wanted on a variety of criminal charges, has reportedly barricaded himself inside the cramped motel room, taken himself hostage, and has announced that he is prepared to hold out “until I freeze Hell over.”

Clues as to the existence of the Intelligent Designer were first uncovered in 1998 by Dr. William Dembski while investigating the gene sequence of the bacterium *E. coli*. Dembski discovered that the basic functioning of the bacterium’s cellular machinery was “much too hard” for him to understand. After discovering the same traits in other organisms, Dembski suspected foul play and alerted the FBI to the possibility that some villain was tampering with human DNA for sinister purposes.

Police followed clues across several western states, and last week a functioning wristwatch was found half-buried in the sands of a California beach. Lab tests proved that the watch’s intricate mechanisms could not possibly have been formed by the natural action of wind and waves. Investigators combed the area for renegade watchmakers with experience in genetic engineering, and focused on Schwartzfeld, who fled from his trailer-park home in Phoenix when police began to close in.

Schwartzfeld claims to be immortal and to have invented life, the universe, and everything else six thousand years ago. He is wanted on outstanding warrants for illegal firearms possession, littering, and the substandard product assembly of platypuses, the human vermiform appendix, and earth’s tectonic plates.

His trailer park neighbor, Eulalie Petronski, told reporters, “Honey, I been livin’ next to him for a year, and trust me, he ain’t no more intelligent than any other man.” Although results of intelligence tests have not been verified, speculation runs high that Schwartzfeld is perhaps at least twice as intelligent as Dr. Dembski.

This morning, Schwartzfeld demanded a helicopter, breakfast in bed, and withdrawal of the surrounding police. He has also threatened bodily harm to all who oppose him, such as inflicting painful boils and raining meteors down from the sky (demonstrated an hour later when he hurled a JesusLand Theme Park Souvenir Paperweight from his half-open window).

At this hour, negotiations are proceeding between the suspect, the FBI, several men who described themselves as “important real scientists in the Bush administration,” and an emergency delegation flown in from the Discovery Institute, but do not look hopeful.