



Willamette Freethinker



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Corvallis Secular Society (CSS) is a Humanist and Freethought society for all nontheists of good will.

CSS is affiliated with the American Humanist Association (AHA) and the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH).

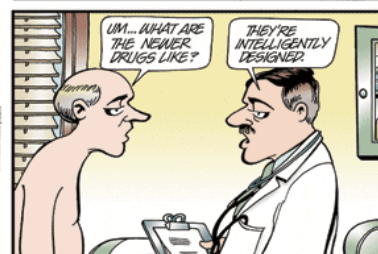
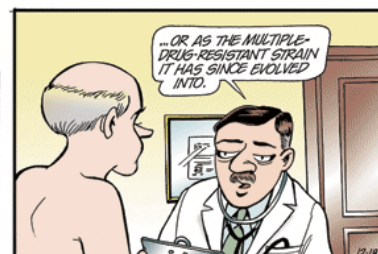
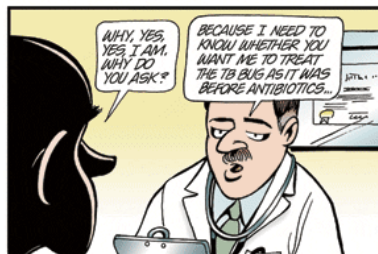
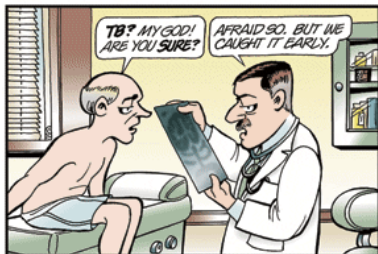
From the Editor:

Angela and I are graciously donating our column spaces this month so that other worthy material could be published instead. Anything you hear implying that we're just too tired to come up with clever columns is a vicious lie being propagated by the Liberal Media.

So instead of our columns, please enjoy a really good Doonesbury cartoon (below), and a cute article I wrote in October that I've been meaning to publish ever since, but kept running out of room for (see page 8).

Reed Byers

Editor, *Willamette Freethinker*



CSS Meetings and Events

***** ATTENTION!!! *****

The January meeting location has been switched to Reed and Angela's house (3035 SE 24th Ave, in Albany!)

We're having trouble with Corvallis Parks and Rec trying to get Corl House reserved for the new year. It should all be resolved by the time you get this newsletter, but in the meanwhile, we've decided we're long overdue for a "movies & fun" meeting at our house. Feel free to arrive by 1pm and/or stick around late for extra socializing! (We won't start the movies until after 2pm, to accommodate folks who can't change their schedule at the last minute.)

One of the videos we'll watch is described on page 10.

Calendar:

- Saturday, Jan 21st 1:00-6:00 CSS meeting at Reed & Angela's House!
- Saturday, Feb 18th 2:00-4:00 CSS regular meeting
- Saturday, Mar 18th 1:00-4:00 CSS potluck

Regular meeting time:

Third Saturday of each month, from 2:00-4:00 pm.

Regular meeting location:

Corl House (3975 NW Witham Hill Dr, Corvallis).

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From the President

Alito

Introduction

Judge Samuel A. Alito, Jr., is President Bush's nominee to replace retiring Justice Sandra Day O'Connor on the U.S. Supreme Court. Over a quarter of a century, he has served as a federal prosecutor, Justice Department attorney, and federal judge. He has been a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit since his appointment by the first President Bush in 1990. He must be evaluated by the U.S. Senate, and by the American people, on his public record. This record is important because it will shed light on the views of a man who, if confirmed, will be given the lifetime position of an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court. This court is the final interpreter of the U.S. Constitution: in effect, the Constitution says what the Supreme Court says it says; there is no higher appeal to its decisions.

The Senate has the constitutional obligation of advise and consent over Supreme Court nominations. It also has the constitutional and moral mandate to protect the Constitution itself, and the rights and welfare of citizens. To this end, the Senate must not simply "rubber-stamp" a nominee; it must carefully examine his or her record in order to determine if the nominee is suitable. For the Senate to do its job, the candidate must be forthright in answering all questions given him, and provide all information requested in a timely manner. The Executive Branch must also provide all documents related to the nominee. Any hesitancy on the part of the nominee or of the Executive Branch is reason enough to reject the nominee.

In 1985, Alito submitted a letter to the Reagan Administration, seeking a position with the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel. He wrote that he had been inspired to attend law school by his disagreement with the decisions of the Warren Court, "particularly in the areas of criminal procedure, the Establishment Clause, and reapportionment." He indicated that he helped craft a Supreme Court brief arguing that "the Constitution does not protect a right to an abortion." This was a position, he wrote, "in which I personally believe very strongly."

Has Judge Alito's views become more moderate since then? [Alito himself has suggested that this letter of twenty years ago should not be taken seriously, because he was applying for a promotion! (What ethical principle does this illustrate?)] His record will answer this question.

Record

- **THE ABILITY OF CONGRESS TO PROTECT THE HEALTH, SAFETY, AND WELFARE OF AMERICANS.** At the top of Alito's 1985 list of "very strongly" held beliefs were "limited government" and "federalism." In a memo from his tenure in the Reagan Justice Department, Alito urged President Reagan to veto legislation that would have protected consumers from

crooked car dealers by making odometer fraud more difficult. "After all," he wrote, "it is the states, and not the federal government, that are charged with protecting the health, safety, and welfare of their citizens."

- **COMMUNITY SAFETY.** Alito, dissenting in the case of *United States v. Rybar*, said that Congress does not have the power under the Commerce Clause to restrict the transfer and possession of machine guns at gun shows. In response to Alito's assertion that Congress must make findings or provide empirical evidence of a link between a regulation and its effect on interstate commerce, the majority said, "Nothing in *Lopez* (an earlier Supreme Court case) requires either Congress or the Executive to play Show and Tell with the federal courts at the peril of invalidation of a Congressional statute."
- **PRIVACY.** In dissent, Alito would have upheld the strip search of a mother and her ten-year old daughter, even though the warrant allowing the search did not name either of them. Judge Michael Chertoff, now head of the Department of Homeland Security, criticized that position as threatening to turn the constitution's search warrant requirement into little more than a "rubber stamp." *Doe v. Groody*.
- **FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE.** Writing for a unanimous court in *Chittister v. Dept of Community & Economic Development*, Judge Alito held that Congress did not have the authority to allow state employees to sue for damages under one section of the Family and Medical Leave Act. By contrast, the Supreme Court in a later case (*Nevada Dept of Human Resources v. Hibbs*) upheld the FMLA against a similar challenge; the Court's decision was written by Chief Justice Rehnquist and joined by Justice O'Connor.
- **REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM.** In dissent, Alito would have upheld a provision of Pennsylvania's restrictive anti-abortion law requiring a woman in certain circumstances to notify her husband before obtaining an abortion. His colleagues on the Third Circuit and the Supreme Court majority disagreed and overturned the provision. *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*. He has advocated the eventual overturning of *Roe v Wade*, while chipping away at it slowly through extremely restrictive state laws.
- **RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE.** In dissent, Alito argued for imposing an evidentiary burden on victims of employment discrimination that, according to the majority, would have "eviscerated" legal protections under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. In particular, the majority said that Alito's position would protect employers from suit even in situations where the employer's belief that it had selected the "best" candidate "was the result of conscious racial bias." *Bray v. Marriott Hotels*.

- **GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE.**

As a lone dissenter in a 10-1 decision of the full Third Circuit, Alito would have made it more difficult for someone alleging discrimination to present sufficient evidence to get his or her case to a jury. In particular, Alito would have prevented a woman claiming gender discrimination from going to trial, even where she had produced evidence showing that her employer's claim that it had a legitimate reason to deny her a promotion was a pretext for the employer's allegedly discriminatory actions. *Sheridan v. E.I. DuPont de Nemours and Co.*

- **RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN JURY SELECTION.**

Alito cast the deciding vote and wrote the opinion in a 2-1 ruling rejecting claims by an African American defendant who had been convicted of felony murder by an all white jury from which black jurors had been impermissibly struck because of their race. The full Third Circuit reversed this ruling, and the majority specifically criticized Alito for having compared statistical evidence about the prosecution's exclusion of blacks from juries in capital cases to an explanation of why a disproportionate number of recent U.S. Presidents have been left-handed. According to the majority, "[t]o suggest any comparability to the striking of jurors based on their race is to minimize the history of discrimination against prospective black jurors and black defendants ..." *Riley v. Taylor.*

- **RIGHTS OF THE INCARCERATED.** Rejected a death row inmate's ineffective assistance of counsel claim where the trial counsel had failed to uncover substantial mitigating evidence — a decision later reversed by the Supreme Court. Wrote a dissent arguing that a policy prohibiting all prisoners in long-term segregation from possessing newspapers, magazines or photographs unless they were religious or legal did not violate the First Amendment.

- **PRAYER AT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION.** In a 1996 case, Alito joined a dissenting opinion arguing that it is constitutional for public schools to allow students to vote on having prayer at graduation ceremonies. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled against officially sanctioned prayer at public school events, in part, because of the coercive nature of such policies on religious minorities.

- **COMPELLING PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO PROMOTE RELIGION.** In *Child Evangelism Fellowship of New Jersey, Inc. v Stafford Township School District*, Judge Alito ruled that a group dedicated to evangelizing children in fundamentalist Christianity had a legal right to compel a public elementary school to publicize its meetings by, among other things, having teachers distribute to their classes the group's evangelizing religious materials.

Conclusion

A Supreme Court nominee should have, according to a July 2001 letter from more than 200 law professors to the Senate Judiciary Committee, "an exemplary record in the law," a

"commitment to protecting the rights of ordinary Americans and [not placing] the interests of the powerful over those of individual citizens," a "record of commitment to the progress made on civil rights, women's rights and individual liberties," and a "respect for the constitutional role Congress plays in promoting these rights and health and safety protections, and ensuring recourse when these rights are breached." For the reasons listed above, and for so many more that did not fit, Alito does not measure up. The Senate should reject the nomination of Judge Samuel Alito; citizens across the land should urge their senators to do so.

Reference & Sources

Alito links at the following websites:

ACLU (The American Civil Liberties Union):
<http://www.aclu.com/>

PFAW (People For the American Way):
<http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/>
and
<http://www.savethecourt.org/>

AA (American Atheists):
<http://www.atheists.org/>

AU (Americans United for Separation of Church and State):
<http://www.au.org/site/PageServer/>

Especially useful, and disturbing, is AU's 22-page report detailing Alito's troubling legal record on **church-state issues**, barely touched upon above. A link to this report is found at <http://www.au.org/site/News2?&id=7705>
The separation of government and religion was a founding principle of our nation; Alito is eager to accelerate President Bush's systematic destruction of this wall of separation.

John Dearing
President of CSS



America Kidnapped Me

by Khaled El-Masri, a German citizen born in Lebanon, was a car salesman before he was detained in December 2003.

Los Angeles Times, 12/18/2005

The U.S. policy of “extraordinary rendition” has a human face, and it is mine.

I am still recovering from an experience that was completely beyond the pale, outside the bounds of any legal framework and unacceptable in any civilized society. Because I believe in the American system of justice, I sued George Tenet, the former CIA director, last week. What happened to me should never be allowed to happen again.

I was born in Kuwait and raised in Lebanon. In 1985, when Lebanon was being torn apart by civil war, I fled to Germany in search of a better life. There I became a citizen and started my own family. I have five children.

On Dec. 31, 2003, I took a bus from Germany to Macedonia. When we arrived, my nightmare began. Macedonian agents confiscated my passport and detained me for 23 days. I was not allowed to contact anyone, including my wife.

At the end of that time, I was forced to record a video saying I had been treated well. Then I was handcuffed, blindfolded and taken to a building where I was severely beaten. My clothes were sliced from my body with a knife or scissors, and my underwear was forcibly removed. I was thrown to the floor, my hands pulled behind me, a boot placed on my back. I was humiliated.

Eventually my blindfold was removed, and I saw men dressed in black, wearing black ski masks. I did not know their nationality. I was put in a diaper, a belt with chains to my wrists and ankles, earmuffs, eye pads, a blindfold and a hood. I was thrown into a plane, and my legs and arms were spread-eagled and secured to the floor. I felt two injections and became nearly unconscious. I felt the plane take off, land and take off. I learned later that I had been taken to Afghanistan.

There, I was beaten again and left in a small, dirty, cold concrete cell. I was extremely thirsty, but there was only a bottle of putrid water in the cell. I was refused fresh water.

That first night I was taken to an interrogation room where I saw men dressed in the same black clothing and ski masks as before. They stripped and photographed me, and took blood and urine samples. I was returned to the cell, where I would remain in solitary confinement for more than four months.

The following night my interrogations began. They asked me if I knew why I had been detained. I said I did not. They told me that I was now in a country with no laws, and did I understand what that meant?

They asked me many times whether I knew the men who were responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks, if I had traveled to

Afghanistan to train in camps and if I associated with certain people in my town of Ulm, Germany. I told the truth: that I had no connection to any terrorists, had never been in Afghanistan and had never been involved in any extremism. I asked repeatedly to meet with a representative of the German government, or a lawyer, or to be brought before a court. Always, my requests were ignored.

In desperation, I began a hunger strike. After 27 days without food, I was taken to meet with two Americans — the prison director and another man, referred to as “the Boss.” I pleaded with them to release me or bring me before a court, but the prison director replied that he could not release me without permission from Washington. He also said that he believed I should not be detained in the prison.

After 37 days without food, I was dragged to the interrogation room, where a feeding tube was forced through my nose into my stomach. I became extremely ill, suffering the worst pain of my life.

After three months, I was taken to meet an American who said he had traveled from Washington, D.C., and who promised I would soon be released. I was also visited by a German-speaking man who explained that I would be allowed to return home but warned that I was never to mention what had happened because the Americans were determined to keep the affair a secret.

On May 28, 2004, almost five months after I was first kidnapped, I was blindfolded, handcuffed and chained to an airplane seat. I was told we would land in a country other than Germany, because the Americans did not want to leave traces of their involvement, but that I would eventually get to Germany.

After we landed I was driven into the mountains, still blindfolded. My captors removed my handcuffs and blindfold and told me to walk down a dark, deserted path and not to look back. I was afraid I would be shot in the back.

I turned a bend and encountered three men who asked why I was illegally in Albania. They took me to the airport, where I bought a ticket home (my wallet had been returned to me). Only after the plane took off did I believe I was actually going home. I had long hair, a beard and had lost 60 pounds. My wife and children had gone to Lebanon, believing I had abandoned them. Thankfully, now we are together again in Germany.

I still do not know why this happened to me. I have been told that the American secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice,

(continued on page 7)

Robertson Feels the Wrath

by Ellis Henican, *Newsday*, 1/13/2006

He must have been rattled by the recent weird weather. Maybe the Rev. Pat Robertson figured hell was finally freezing over.

What else could possibly explain the headstrong televangelist apologizing to the family of the stricken Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon?

Robertson has said some jaw-dropping stuff over the past couple of years. That the U.S. government should assassinate the president of Venezuela. That God should take the lives of a Supreme Court justice or two. That feminists and gays caused 9/11.

But never — until now — has the cold-hearted God-caster said anything like, "I'm sorry."

Robertson's latest stink bomb came last Thursday. The wacky reverend was in his state-of-the-art studio at the Christian Broadcasting Network, hosting his popular "700 Club." That's when he looked the camera and issued a stunning medical and theological diagnosis of the 77-year-old Sharon, who'd just been struck with a massive stroke and was barely clinging to life.

God was angry, Robertson revealed, and he gave the Israeli prime minister that stroke.

A real Old Testament smiting!

How did Robertson know this? Why did God choose to tell him? And what did this upsetting news say about all the other people around the world who've been stricken with strokes, heart attacks, cancer and other serious ailments — or fell down the stairs and died? Was God smiting them, too?

What set God off, according to Robertson, was Sharon's decision to evict Israeli settlers from the Gaza strip. Apparently, the Almighty doesn't think the Palestinians deserve a homeland, too.

"God has enmity against those who 'divide my land,'" Robertson said. "God says, 'This land belongs to me. You'd better leave it alone.'" Sharon was "dividing God's land."

So pow! God reacted swiftly with that life-threatening eruption in the prime minister's brain!

Sharon's long-distance diagnosis was met with a predictable reaction — widespread derision across political lines. Several conservative Christian leaders immediately disavowed Robertson's remarks. Even President Bush, a longtime Robertson ally, put out a statement distancing himself.

And yesterday, Robertson's assistants in Virginia Beach agreed the critics had a point.

The apology took the form of a letter to Sharon's son Omri. It was addressed to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, where the prime minister still lies critically ill.

"I ask your forgiveness and the forgiveness of the people of Israel for remarks I made at the time concerning the writing of the holy prophet Joel and his view of the inviolate nature of the land of Israel," Robertson wrote.

"My zeal, my love of Israel and my concern for the future safety of your nation led me to make remarks which I can now view in retrospect as inappropriate and insensitive in light of a national grief experienced because of your father's illness," the contrite clergyman went on.

Apparently, the problem was he loved Israel — too much!

So what changed?

Did Robertson truly feel bad? Did his fellow evangelicals pressure him? Perhaps that played a role. But according to Max Blumenthal, who investigates the religious right for the *Nation* magazine and knows this territory better than any journalist alive, something else could be at play as well.

It turns out that Robertson's bank account — not just his soul — was on the line.

The comments had created a huge uproar in Israel.

"Outrageous" was the word that Daniel Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to Washington, used. The anger was so intense that the nation's tourism ministry took the unusual step of expelling Robertson from a group of evangelical Christians who are developing a Holy Land theme park in Galilee.

It was a \$50-million deal, 125 acres near the Sea of Galilee, close to the spot where Jesus is said to have walked on water and fed 5,000 with five loaves and two fish.

And Robertson's big mouth had talked him out of the money.

No one could say last night if Robertson's apology will talk him back in.

But this much was certain: Hell will really have to freeze over before the motor-mouthed minister apologizes again.

Portland Church Blocked From Shielding Assets

A judge clarifies what property belongs to the archdiocese and is subject to damages.

by Associated Press, 12/31/2005

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — A bankruptcy judge ruled Friday that the Archdiocese of Portland, not its parishes, owns church assets, dealing a major blow to its efforts to protect church property from lawsuits filed by alleged victims of priest sex abuse.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Elizabeth Perris, in a pair of opinions, ruled that church property and real estate are under the control of the archdiocese, not its individual parishes, as lawyers for the archdiocese had argued.

In July 2004, the archdiocese became the first in the nation to file for bankruptcy protection, just before the scheduled start of jury trials involving about \$155 million in damages.

Since then, the archdiocese has been trying to protect church buildings and real estate from being included in settlements, arguing that the property is owned by the 124 individual parishes and a handful of schools — not the archdiocese.

Perris, however, ruled it was clear the archdiocese held title to all property and controlled church assets.

The archdiocese, Perris wrote, has the “authority to convey real property without limitation.”

Attorneys for the accusers praised the ruling, saying it should allow the bankruptcy case to move forward.

“It’s a clear victory,” said Erin Olson, who represents some of the alleged victims.

Lawyers for the archdiocese said they were considering an appeal.

“We believe strongly the decision is not supported by the facts of the law and that it infringes on the archdiocese’s and parishioners’ rights to the free exercise of religion,” said Howard Levine, a lawyer for the archdiocese.

Perris rejected arguments that accepting the jurisdiction of a federal court might violate the First Amendment rights of the church to the free exercise of religion by forcing it to ignore church law on ownership.

“There is no First Amendment impediment to this court’s jurisdiction,” Perris wrote.

She ruled that the case was about property — not religion.

“Who owns the property is, quite simply, not a theological or doctrinal matter,” Perris wrote. “The religious organization’s internal law is not relevant to the dispute.”

The ruling means that in principle, the archdiocese could be forced to sell off church properties to pay settlements or court awards to victims of sexual abuse. However, Perris left open the question of whether the sale of individual church properties could pose an unfair burden on the practice of religion under the Religious Freedom and Restoration Act of 1993.

Her ruling supports an earlier decision in the bankruptcy proceedings of the Diocese of Spokane in Washington state, which sought protection from creditors shortly after the Archdiocese of Portland filed.

In the Washington case, U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Patricia Williams said Spokane Bishop William S. Skylstad agreed to abide by federal law when he voluntarily entered the diocese into bankruptcy, and could not claim that property ownership must be decided by church law.

“At a time when we see around the world the violent consequences of the assumption of religious authority by government, Americans may count themselves fortunate: Our regard for constitutional boundaries has protected us from similar travails, while allowing private religious exercise to flourish.... Those who would renegotiate the boundaries between church and state must therefore answer a difficult question: Why would we trade a system that has served us so well for one that has served others so poorly?”

— U.S. Supreme Court Justice
Sandra Day O’Connor

California High School Sued Over Class Discussing “Intelligent Design”

by Juliana Barbassa, Associated Press, 1/10/2006

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — A rural high school teaching a religion-based alternative to evolution was sued Tuesday by a group of parents who said the class should be stopped because it violates the U.S. Constitution.

Frazier Mountain High School in Lebec violated the separation of church and state while attempting to legitimize the theory of “intelligent design” by introducing it as philosophy taught by a minister’s wife, according to the U.S. District Court suit filed by parents of 13 students.

“The course was designed to advance religious theories on the origins of life, including creationism and its offshoot, ‘intelligent design,’” the suit said. “Because the teacher has no scientific training, students are not provided with any critical analysis of this presentation.”

The suit was filed by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which successfully blocked Dover, Pa., schools last month from using science courses to advance the theory that living things are so complex they must have been designed by a higher being.

Similar battles are being fought in Georgia and Kansas over the controversial subject. Officials at El Tejon Unified School District, which is a defendant in the suit, could not immediately be reached for comment. Superintendent John Wight said last week that the class, “Philosophy of Design,” was not being taught as science and was an opportunity for students to debate the controversial issue.

Fifteen students were enrolled in the class in Lebec, a town of 1,285 in the Tehachapi mountains between the agricultural Central Valley and Los Angeles, about 75 miles south.

The five-member school board was divided when it learned about the class last month and discovered three guest lecturers were scheduled to speak in support of intelligent design, but none in favor of evolution.

One pro-evolution speaker listed on the syllabus declined to participate because he disagreed with the class topic, and another — Nobel laureate Francis Crick, who co-discovered the structure of DNA — had died more than a year earlier.

The class is taught by social studies teacher Sharon Lemburg, who is married to an Assembly of God pastor.

An initial course description sent to parents in December said it would examine “evolution as a theory and will discuss the scientific, biological, and Biblical aspects that suggest why Darwin’s philosophy is not rock solid.”

The El Tejon district’s Board of Trustees approved the course 3-2 with a revised syllabus in a Jan. 1 special session, during which board members had to vote up or down on the entire winter session curriculum.

Classes started two days later, with a less scientific and more philosophical class plan that relied solely on videos, not guest speakers.

Still, the Washington, D.C.-based group said that with only one exception the course “relies exclusively on videos that advocate religious perspectives and present religious theories as scientific ones.”

“This is clearly intended to introduce religion into a public school,” said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The lawsuit against the district and its trustees on behalf of 11 parents seeks a temporary restraining order to halt the four-week class in its second week.

The case is Hurst v. Newman, 06-00012.

America Kidnapped Me...

(cont. from page 4)

confirmed in a meeting with the German chancellor that my case was a “mistake” — and that American officials later denied that she said this. I was not present at this meeting. No one from the American government has ever contacted me or offered me any explanation or apology for the pain they caused me.

Secretary Rice has stated publicly, during a discussion of my case, that “any policy will sometimes result in errors.” But that is exactly why extraordinary rendition is so dangerous. As my interrogators made clear when they told me I was being held in a country with no laws, the very purpose of extraordinary rendition is to deny a person the protection of the law.

I begged my captors many times to bring me before a court, where I could explain to a judge that a mistake had been made. Every time, they refused. In this way, a “mistake” that could have been quickly corrected led to several months of cruel treatment and meaningless suffering, for me and my entire family.

My captors would not bring me to court, so last week I brought them to court. Helped by the American Civil Liberties Union, I sued the U.S. government because I believe what happened to me was illegal and should not be done to others. And I believe the American people, when they hear my story, will agree.

How to Be a Skeptic in the Age of the Internet

by Reed Byers, CSS Member, 10/23/2005

OK, folks, it's time for a computer lesson. This lesson will come in the form of a story — a true story, that just occurred a mere five minutes ago. Pay close attention; there'll be a quiz at the end of the column.

"Doo dee doo dee doo... Hmm, think I'll check email. Haven't done THAT in a couple of days", Reed thought to himself as he clicked a few buttons on his computer.

The email software started downloading 24 messages, of which half were automatically deleted as spam. Cursing his sister for making his previously-safe email address available to spammers, Reed glanced at the remaining messages. One caught his eye. Another in a long series of forwarded emails from the Christian side of his family.

They must have a list of fifty people or more that they send these things to. Sometimes they forward humor; other times they forward items they consider to be "of concern". Sometimes, I'm not sure which it is supposed to be.

In this case, it's a message warning readers of a government website that provides drivers license info — including pictures! — to anyone who logs in. Big Brother has gone too far this time! The link to the page is included in the email.

YAWN

OK, lets see how long it takes to dispel THIS one.

Well, first off, there's no way I'm actually clicking the link. Too much spyware and other "malware" (viruses, etc) out there to just blindly click a link that's been randomly forwarded to you in Email. (I use the Firefox browser, which is MUCH safer than Internet Explorer — and I have anti-virus and anti-spyware protection installed. But the best protection of all is always: Don't Take Stupid Chances.)

So how do I check to see if it's real?

Sue me. I'm lazy. I type the main part of the address into a Google search box (*NOT* the address bar of the browser), and I see what comes up.

The first match is the page itself. No surprise. (It claims to be "Drivers License Search — National Motor Vehicle License Bureau". Oooh, scary.) The second match doesn't look very interesting. The third match is named "Can People Look Up My Driver's License on the Internet for Free?". And its web address? Bingo!
Urbanlegends.about.com

Clicking THAT link (since I know that ABOUT.COM is a major info site, and is safe), I am instantly taken to a page describing the exact email that was forwarded to me, explaining that the page is a practical joke. If you visit the page and enter a bunch of info to search for, it pops up a drivers license for the "state of Confusion", with a picture of a chimpanzee and a message saying "Gotcha. You didn't really think you could get someone's drivers license over the internet, did you?"

Total elapsed time to debunk the email? MAYBE as much as two minutes. Now lets look at how I handled the situation again, in slow-motion instant replay:

- I didn't freak out.
- I didn't blast an easily-proven-false email out to "everyone I know", scaring and riling folks up for no reason.
- I demonstrated that the original email was a practical joke, and will remember it if I hear anyone talking about this "scary government website" in the future.
- And finally, I did so SAFELY, without being lured into actually visiting a site that COULD be potentially harmful.

Now, those of you reading this newsletter are, by and large, atheists and humanists. Your "skeptical quotient" is naturally higher than usual. (And congratulations on your intelligence!) So, I'd like to think that very few readers of this newsletter might fall for something like this.

But there's something about computers that makes some people act, well, less intelligent than they are. I've seen people who would NEVER believe a crazy story told them face-to-face, panic and email everyone they know when they see a similar story on a computer.

Look, it's very simple: Never email *ANYTHING* to "everybody you know". Especially if it is something scary, panicky or otherwise emotional. And DOUBLY ESPECIALLY if you haven't bothered doing some minimal testing of the facts first.

There are websites dedicated to helping you find out what's real and what's not. **Snopes.com** is a very good site. So is **Urbanlegends.about.com**. And if you can't think of any of those (or are too lazy, like me), **Google** is always your friend.

Maintain a skeptical outlook; it'll never steer you wrong.

Did Jesus Exist? Court to Decide

by Reuters, 1/4/2006

ROME, Italy (Reuters) — Forget the U.S. debate over intelligent design versus evolution.

An Italian court is tackling Jesus — and whether the Roman Catholic Church may be breaking the law by teaching that he existed 2,000 years ago.

The case pits against each other two men in their 70s, who are from the same central Italian town and even went to the same seminary school in their teenage years.

The defendant, Enrico Righi, went on to become a priest writing for the parish newspaper. The plaintiff, Luigi Cascioli, became a vocal atheist who, after years of legal wrangling, is set to get his day in court later this month.

“I started this lawsuit because I wanted to deal the final blow against the Church, the bearer of obscurantism and regression,” Cascioli told Reuters.

Cascioli says Righi, and by extension the whole Church, broke two Italian laws. The first is “Abuso di Credulita Popolare” (Abuse of Popular Belief) meant to protect people against being swindled or conned. The second crime, he says, is “Sostituzione di Persona,” or impersonation.

“The Church constructed Christ upon the personality of John of Gamala,” Cascioli claimed, referring to the 1st century Jew who fought against the Roman army.

A court in Viterbo will hear from Righi, who has yet to be indicted, at a January 27 preliminary hearing meant to determine whether the case has enough merit to go forward.

“In my book, ‘The Fable of Christ,’ I present proof Jesus did not exist as a historic figure. He must now refute this by showing proof of Christ’s existence,” Cascioli said.

Speaking to Reuters, Righi, 76, sounded frustrated by the case and baffled as to why Cascioli — who, like him, came from the town of Bagnoregio — singled him out in his crusade against the Church.

“We’re both from Bagnoregio, both of us. We were in seminary together. Then he took a different path and we didn’t see each other anymore,” Righi said.

“Since I’m a priest, and I write in the parish newspaper, he is now suing me because I ‘trick’ the people.”



Statue of Jesus Christ with cross, atop St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

Righi claims there is plenty of evidence to support the existence of Jesus, including historical texts.

He also claims that justice is on his side. The judge presiding over the hearing has tried, repeatedly, to dismiss the case — prompting appeals from Cascioli.

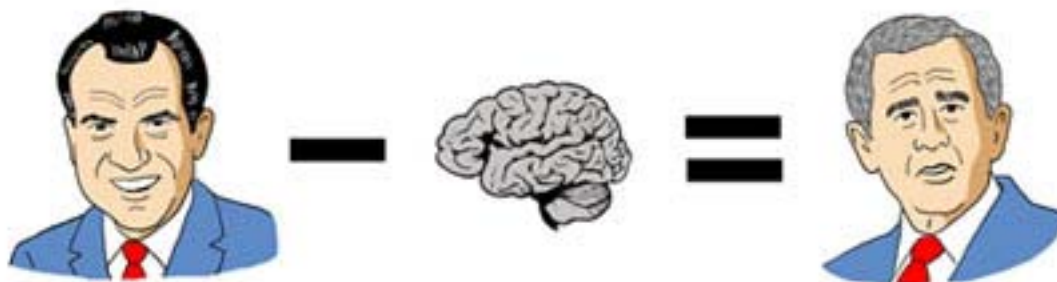
“Cascioli says he didn’t exist. And I said that he did,” he said. “The judge will decide if Christ exists or not.”

Even Cascioli admits that the odds are against him, especially in Roman Catholic Italy.

“It would take a miracle to win,” he joked.

An Equation for Our Times

by Tom Tomorrow, 1/6/06



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The Great Debate — Does God Exist?

Dr. Michael Shermer v. Dr. Douglas Geivett

[Editor's Note: *We will be watching the DVD of this debate at January's CSS Meeting at Reed & Angela's house.*]

The great debate on the existence of God took place at Stanford University on January 24, 2005. Dr. Geivett made the case for God's existence using arguments from both philosophy and science; Dr. Shermer responded to Dr. Geivett's arguments, then made the case that God and religion are human and social constructions. The audience response to both sides make for a very lively discussion.

Dr. Michael Shermer is the Founding Publisher of Skeptic magazine, the Director of the Skeptics Society, a monthly columnist for Scientific American, and the host of the Skeptics Distinguished Science Lecture Series at the California Institute of Technology. He was a professor for 19 years at Glendale College and Occidental College. He conducts research on the psychology of belief. He is the author of *Science Friction: Where the Known Meets the Unknown*; *The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Share, Care, and Follow the Golden Rule*; *In Darwin's Shadow: The Life and Science of Alfred Russel Wallace*; *The Borderlands of Science: Denying History*; *How We Believe: Science, Skepticism, and the Search for God*; and *Why People Believe Weird Things*. He is the editor of the *Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience*. Dr. Shermer received his B.A. in psychology from Pepperdine

University, M.A. in experimental psychology from California State University, Fullerton, and his Pd.D. in the history of science from Claremont Graduate University in California.

Dr. Douglas Geivett is Professor of Philosophy at the Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. Dr. Geivett's research interests include the philosophy of religion, philosophical theology, epistemology, and the history of modern philosophy. He is the author of *Evil and the Evidence for God* and co-editor of *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology and In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*. Dr. Geivett has contributed chapters to *God Matters: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*; *God Under Fire: The Rationality of Theism*; and *Does God Exist? The Craig-Flew Debate*. Dr. Geivett is the former president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. In the past, Dr. Geivett has served as minister to college students at churches in the Pacific Northwest and in Southern California and continues to speak in churches and on university campuses on subjects related to apologetics and the Christian life. Dr. Geivett received a B.S. from Multnomah School of the Bible, an M.A. from Dallas Theological Seminary, another M.A. from Gonzaga University, and his Ph.D. from the University of Southern California.

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