



The Newsletter of
The Humanist Association of Massachusetts

www.masshumanists.org

April/May 2004

ON TUESDAY, APRIL 20 AT 7:00 PM

PROF. STEVEN PINKER SPEAKS ON:

**"THE EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION"
HARVARD SCIENCE CENTER, HALL D**

The author of "How the Brain Works," Steven Pinker, poses this provocative question: Do you suppose there is a God module in the brain? Are we hard wired with the tendency to believe in a god? Why, we retort, are there some of us who resist believing?

The sense of awareness has intrigued humankind for millennia. In the past 100 years, amazing discoveries about the brain have come to light. When it dies, for example, we die. Its behavior IS us. No wonder that we want to know more and that universities relish courses in the cognitive sciences. And it's no surprise that the Harvard Secular Society is the main sponsor of this talk, and that its president, Kerry Dingle, '05, is majoring in neuroscience. This generation can't get enough of the brain.

Humanists are Darwinian: they believe in natural selection, and in its ability to shape the mind in the environment in which it evolved. But mystery abounds. Pinker writes, for example, that "the 'I' is not a combination of body parts or brain states or bits of information, but a unity of selfness over time, a single locus that is nowhere in particular." So what then of life's meaning? He closes the book with this: "Our bafflement at the mysteries of the ages may have been the price we paid for a combinatorial mind that opened up a world of words and sentences, of theories and equations, of poems and melodies, of jokes and stories, the very things that make a mind worth having."

A professor of Psychology, Prof. Pinker has taught at Stanford and MIT. He was educated at McGill and Harvard. His 1994 book, "The Language Instinct," brought him world-wide fame.

A BLATANT, SELF-SERVING WORD

Skeptical and progressive readers, having grabbed your attention with this tri part announcement of brilliant talks, please consider joining the Humanist community of Massachusetts, respectfully known as HAM. We likeminded folk are relatively few—let's band together, contribute to and work for a more fair and reasonable society. Write to Tom Ferrick, Humanist Association of Massachusetts, P. O. Box 381125, Cambridge, MA 02238. E-mail: thomas_ferrick@harvard.edu

ON SUNDAY, APRIL 25 AT 1:30 PM

PROF. EDWARD O. WILSON WILL GIVE

**THE TERM'S MAJOR ADDRESS
"THE FUTURE OF LIFE"**

**HARVARD SCIENCE CENTER, HALL D
(PARKING IS FREE ON SUNDAYS IN LITTAUER LOT)**

Can the peoples of the earth have both material prosperity and a vibrant biosphere? Annually, around Earth Day, we ought to examine that question in depth. Two years ago, Chet Raymo posed that question in his "Science Musings" in the Boston Globe. He answered "Yes" because he had just read E. O. Wilson's newly published, *The Future of Life*, a plan for saving Earth's biological heritage. The author would be named "Humanist of the Year" just a few months later. And now it's time to study again the hard choices we must make if that balance is to be realized.

Dr. Edward O. Wilson has been teaching at Harvard since 1956. He is and always has been a research professor in biology, but his array of books, twenty-one in number, has won him plaudits from all corners of the globe, two Pulitzer prizes, (for *On Human Nature* and *Ants*), honors and medals from the major nature groups, and 27 honorary degrees. His book, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, draws together the sciences, humanities and the arts into a broad study of human knowledge. But brilliant theory gives way to practical planning and to missionary zeal when we turn to *The Future of Life*.

One review mentions how he wrestles with a central dilemma. "He deflates the myth that environmental policy is antithetical to economic growth by illustrating how new methods of conservation can ensure long-term economic well being." And he challenges religious and philosophic leaders to combine their energies to win this fight. He reminds us that the entire range of living things has the potential to nourish us, protect us and cure our illnesses. Is it not true, we have but one option? "Get Active."

This is the Alexander Lincoln, Jr., Lecture of 2004. Mr. Lincoln, a member of the Harvard class of 1932, was long interested in bible scholarship, comparative religion, and the world of Nature. As a result, about fifteen years ago, with a substantial gift, Alex laid the foundation for the Humanist Chaplaincy Endowment Fund.

PROPAGANDA

Some of you may be aware of the historical provenance of this word. It derives from *Congregatio Sacra Propaganda Fide* (Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith), an arm of the Vatican apparatus. This originated as a committee of Roman Catholic cardinals, established by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 to supervise foreign missions. Later, Pope Urban VIII established a College of Propaganda for education of Priests for foreign missions.

The connotation of the word has of course evolved, especially in the last century, to suggest the intentional dissemination of false or misleading information to the benefit or detriment of a group, institution, movement, etc.

Which brings me to *The Passion of the Christ*, the recent film by Mel Gibson. I have not seen the film, but I have read umpteen reviews, theological as well as aesthetic. Almost all operate from the basic presumption of the historical accuracy of the Gospels, our sole "historical" source for the events dealt with in this movie (although there is much in the film derived, apparently, from the *Stations of the Cross* service of the Catholic Church, as well). The only other "historical" verification even of the existence of a person known as Jesus of Nazareth was the inscribed ossuary which recently emerged and was finally declared bogus by numerous archeologists.

However, any fair reading of the Gospels cannot help but discern that there is a clear evolution of the story from that of the simple rabbi and prophet who antagonized both Jewish priests and Roman political authorities resulting in his violent torture and death which appears in Mark (written about 40 years after the events in question) to the detailed miraculous scenario of the Resurrection which appears in John, written perhaps 80 years afterwards. The Gospels of Luke and Matthew represent clearly the transitional forms of the story.

Generations of Christian scholars have exerted themselves to rationalize the glaring contradictions, additions and elisions among the Gospels. A Fundamentalist sister-in-law gave me a four-volume set of such Apologetics which "successfully" explained away all of the seeming contradictions. Talk about contortions!

Forty years of oral tradition would be expected to have resulted in numerous embellishments and symbolic emendations, especially those specifically directed towards placing Jesus in the direct line of David and cloaking him in the mantle of the Redeemer or Messiah predicted by Isaiah. 80 years resulted in more elaboration of the theme of the miraculous Resurrection. It required hundreds of years more to rigidify the Resurrection into the resuscitation of the full bodily form of Jesus into Heaven and a few hundred more to "establish" the definite bodily resurrection of true believers by Augustine.

Some of the obscurities were "cleared up" by Papal declaration. For instance, there are three Marys mentioned in the Gospels. It seems likely from a close textual analysis that they are different women. However, a Pope, sick of controversy, simply declared that all of the Marys were the same person. Done.

All of this should not detract from the incredible power of this story of the Passion (Latin *passere*, to suffer). One of the peak experiences of my life was singing in the Chorus Pro Musica with the BSO in a performance of Bach's *St. John's Passion* under Charles Munch.

I was powerfully affected by witnessing a series of processions in Spain during Semana Santa in 1967 during which heavy floats bearing effigies representing the various events of the Passion are borne by sweating men. Actually, I seemed more affected than many of the participants and local onlookers, who seemed to be more involved in the carnival atmosphere of the event than the sufferings of Jesus. Many of the bearers rushed into cafes for a quick beer when the floats were intermittently set down.

It might truly be said that the Passion is "the greatest story ever told." Unfortunately, it is also the "greatest story ever sold." Mel Gibson is just the most recent in a long, long line of people who have twisted and embellished the story to intensify its propaganda potential. It is not historical veracity that is sought (which is probably unobtainable anyway, since it is unknowable), but Propagation of the Faith. Perhaps this approach is artistically more defensible than the shaved armpits Jeffrey Hunter displayed during the crucifixion scene in *King of Kings*, but it is still fiction and speculation.

—Joe Gerstein

HUMANISM TO ESTABLISH NEW ROOTS IN WORCESTER

It was a goal of the New England Humanist Conference held in Worcester last fall to found a new Humanist community in that area. We want to begin by the 24th of May.

David Niose of nearby Lunenburg, a new member of HAM, will spearhead the effort. He will have the help of the NEHC committee, including our Connecticut friends and David Miller's humanist fellowship that's connected to the U.U. church where the fall conference was held. He will soon be sending invitations to every humanist-minded person we know in Worcester County assuring them of a cordial welcome and an informative program. Perhaps they will be the founders of the "Greater Worcester Humanists," a new force for good, and for reason, in central Massachusetts. Please spread the word.

IS AMERICA SAFE FROM RELIGION?
BOOK REVIEW, PART 2: ALAN WOLFE'S
"THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN RELIGION"

Alan Wolfe deals with the above question in his final chapter. His answer is an optimistic yes, and his reasoning certainly deserves scrutiny.

His conclusion is based on observations of what people actually do rather than what they say they believe. If someone claims to be guided by the Bible, but can't tell you much that's in it, one must conclude that she doesn't really take the Bible as seriously as she thinks she does. Her choice of a church may depend largely on the fellowship it offers, whether she likes the other members, and whether she prefers a dignified service or a more enthusiastic or even raucous one. Her god may be comfortable, loving, and kind, one she feels a personal relationship with. But even when she says he is all powerful, she knows from experience not to expect too much from him. Her god may be less logical than the one philosophers have constructed, but it's one she can believe in without having to be as impractical as a person who really believes that faith can move mountains.

Wolfe is critical of those who feel that practicing Christians are a people apart who cannot really fit in with democracy. He agrees that certain strident Fundamentalists are trying to impose some type of theocracy on our country, but claims that they are a small minority far outnumbered by middle of the road Evangelicals, not to mention the more liberal mainline churches. Those most successful in gaining new members have become more and more mainstream. They preach a feel good religion far from the angry god presented by Jonathan Edwards. Yes, they want the phrase "under god" and also like formal prayers at graduations, etc., but they don't offer any serious challenge to our Constitutional liberties.

Wolfe presents a strong case, but is too optimistic. He may be correct that true Fundamentalists are not that numerous and are actually declining in number. But they are aggressive, have developed tremendous political clout, and do threaten our liberties. Their fight against women's rights has had many successes, and they are holding up gay rights as well. While other Christians may not really believe in the harsh doctrines of the Fundamentalists, they think they do, and are likely to acquiesce in many of the social demands of the stricter sects. Currently the Religious Right has a President of its choosing. They seem more dangerous than Wolfe wants to admit.

Wolfe's findings do point to advice on how Humanists should change their strategy. If Evangelicals are as different from the rigid Fundamentalists as he says they are, maybe we can form alliances with them on at least

some issues. Here, I think, we will have to show more tolerance. Perhaps we can't really understand what they mean by a close relationship with god, but at least we should be able to respect them both as persons, and for their feelings, rather than simply despising them as so many of us do. If we want allies, we do have to show them the respect we want from them.

—Peter B. Denison

ON TUESDAY, MAY 4 AT 7:00 PM
OWEN FLANAGAN FROM DUKE TALKS ON
"THE PROBLEM OF THE SOUL"
HARVARD SCIENCE CENTER, HALL A

This talk is based on Professor Flanagan's highly acclaimed book of the same name (2002). So, if you were to have him define the soul, he would answer, "the brain!" In this case, it's a philosopher speaking, who draws his understanding of reality from modern science. He grapples with the fact that, as the book jacket says, "the very attributes that make us human—free will, the permanence of personal identity, the existence of the soul—are threatened by the emergent sciences of the mind." They must be understood differently. Religion, in particular, is bereft of meaning. But he leaves the reader with hope, poetry, and a sense of awe.

Reason magazine reviewed Flanagan's book with much criticism, pointing out that, while demolishing old ways of thinking, it raises more questions than it can answer. "Nevertheless, the fear that a naturalistic worldview will undermine all morality and meaning is exaggerated. Finding out that you are not the kind of metaphysical entity you might have thought you were doesn't make pain hurt any less, strawberries taste any worse, or love any less worth pursuing. It is not yet clear whether the more fleshed-out view that we may ultimately develop will, as Flanagan believes, prove as psychologically satisfying as the one we leave behind. But if naturalism leaves us with a new set of problems in place of our old and comforting myths, it also leaves us with a new opportunity to create meaning. That, too, is a kind of meaning."

The author considers Buddhism "a great ethical and metaphysical tradition, not a religious tradition." Remaining always a materialist he is still a practitioner of mindfulness. A paradox? His examination of the Self will remind you of Tom Clark, whose Center for Naturalism, www.twc@naturalism.org, is a most welcome co-sponsor of this event.

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Address Correction Requested

THREE SPRING LECTURES YOU MUST NOT MISS:

STEVEN PINKER

Tuesday, April 20, 2004

The Evolutionary Psychology of Religion

"Is there a 'God Module' in the Brain?"

Harvard Science Center, Hall D, at 7:00 p.m.

EDWARD O. WILSON

Sunday, April 25, 2004

"The Future of Life"

Harvard Science Center, Hall D, at 1:30 p.m.

OWEN FLANAGAN

Tuesday, May 4, 2004

"The Problem of the Soul"

Harvard Science Center, Hall A, at 7:00 p.m.

HUMANISTS BET ON LAS VEGAS

The Massachusetts contingent attending the AHA Annual Conference will be the largest ever. One major reason is that Dr. Joe Gerstein and his wife Barbara will receive the Humanist Pioneer Award for all their efforts on behalf of Smart Recovery. Another reason is that the Tufts' philosopher, Professor Daniel Dennett, is our Humanist of the Year. His extraordinary book on evolution, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, dispenses with the need of a creator. An unlikely reason is that the conference takes place in America's gambling capitol; otherwise it's a great town and the people are worth meeting. And it has given us the current president of the AHA, the civil rights attorney, Mel Lipman.

