

New York City Atheists

Serving the tri-state area • An affiliate of American Atheists

June 2002

(212) 330-6794 PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013
<http://foody.org/atheist.html> atheist@foody.org

Events

June Meeting

Sunday, June 30, 3:30-5:00 P.M.
Moonstruck East diner, upstairs
449 Third Ave. (corner of 31 St.)
Agenda: WBAI, news, picnic, meeting
location
For more information, contact us at
(212) 330-6794 or atheist@foody.org.

Also of atheist interest:

Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York

Tuesday, July 9 and 23, 2002
Regular meetings on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month, 6:30 P.M. at the Moonstruck East Restaurant (upstairs), 449 Third Avenue on the corner of 31st Street, Manhattan, for dinner and conversation.
For more information, call (914) 588-5284 or e-mail info.hsmny@corliss-lamont.org or see the Web site www.corliss-lamont.org/hsmny

Center for Inquiry-MetroNY

June 27 and July 11, 2002 - Secular Connections with Arnell Dowret are held every 2nd and 4th Thursday of the month.
July 5, 2002 - Think-Tank: "Does the UN's 'Human Rights' Jive with the Humanist Manifesto? Does the US Constitution?" All events held at 89 Walnut St., Montclair, New Jersey, at 7:30 P.M.
July 6, 2002 - Thomas Paine Homage at Burnham Park, Morristown, New Jersey, Beginning at 1:00 P.M. Mary Wollstonecraft will also be honored.
For more information, call (973) 655-9556 or e-mail cfimetronny@aol.com or see the Web site www.cfi-metronny.com

Long Island Secular Humanists

Friday, July 12, 2002: Book Discussion Club: Howard Zinn, *A People's History Of The United States* (first Half), Bill Mohrman's house, Massapequa, (516) 795-3318.
Sunday, July 14, 11 A.M., LISH Summer Buffet Brunch. Golden Corral, 88 Veterans Memorial Hwy. (Rt. 454), Commack (just west of the Sunken Meadow Pkwy.) Cost, approx. \$12/person, bring cash to the restaurant. RSVP by July 10 at (516) 742-1662, leave your name, number of persons attending, and phone #.
For more information, call (516) 742-1662 or e-mail lisechum@aol.com or see the Web site www.homestead.com/lishweb

WBAI Program Launches

"Equal Time for Freethought" launched this past Sunday at 6:30 P.M. as a half-hour program on WBAI-FM. After two months of no contact, the station had given us little more than week's warning before the first show. But after a meeting two weeks ago and a brief rehearsal in the lobby, we six producers were ushered into the studio, and settled in quickly behind the microphones. We handled the program's segments -- news; an interview with Norm Allen, Jr., an editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine and director of African American Humanists; meeting announcements; and music -- well thanks to a friendly engineer, a precise program outline and script, and the frantic passing of notes. (We also tried frantic hand-waving, which proved useless.) We finished a few seconds earlier than planned, and left euphoric. See foody.org/freethoughtradio.html for future and past program notes.

You can listen to "Equal Time for Freethought" every Sunday at 6:30 P.M. on WBAI-FM (99.5).

Picnic in July?

A picnic in Central Park would be a fun summer alternative to an indoor meeting, when attendance will dip anyway. I (Josh Karpf) plan to ask the next meeting for permission to replace the July meeting with a potluck picnic, with a small treasury expenditure for drinks and snacks.

May Meeting Happily Ignores Agenda

Twenty-one people attended, coming from all five boroughs plus Westchester, Long Island, New Jersey, and Philadelphia.

Joe Zamecki of American Atheists discussed the multi-group,

American Atheists-led Godless Americans March on Washington, scheduled for midday Saturday, November 2. He compared it to atheist pride marches held in state capitals in the early nineties, and is investigating rates for a chartered bus for New York City area freethinkers. We discussed the event and how to promote it to other local freethinkers.

We talked about the recent federal appeals court decision that ruled New York State's kosher food laws unconstitutional (see "State Kosher Laws Rejected" in news). We voted 10-0 for NYC Atheists to urge State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer to not challenge this ruling, as he may do. We also talked about religious-use property laws.

We discussed the case of Amy Velez, the Lower East Side school-board member who briefly lost her seat after being accused of sprinkling magical powder before a superintendent's door (see "Voodoo Powder Figure" in news). Velez denies the act, and in one article was said to call herself an atheist. Most members were skeptical, some wanted to hear her side of the story, and one said that if she is an atheist, her position would be strengthened by association with NYC Atheists. We agreed that NYC Atheists should contact Velez.

We talked about how Star Jones, a panelist on the TV talk show *The View* who said she would never vote for an atheist, is under increasing pressure to cease demeaning the atheist community and to apologize for her negative stereotyping. We agreed that NYC Atheists should write to Star Jones, and to her producers and promoters, using the Anti-Discrimination Support Network letter helpfully provided by the northern New Jersey-based Center for Inquiry.

A member urged us to sue his company for refusing to print an atheist T-shirt. After discussion, the

consensus was wait till we had learned more about the situation.

New York City Atheists members are invited to appear on *Atheist Viewpoint* (www.atheistviewpoint.tv), American Atheists' public-access cable TV news and commentary show. I (Josh Karpf) have agreed to do so. The studio is in Cranford, New Jersey, near Newark, reachable by commuter train or bus.

Also, a new Manhattan sponsor is needed for the show. If you are a Manhattan resident and are interested in receiving the videotapes and delivering them to a cable station, or a New York City area atheist interested in appearing on the show, contact Joe Zamecki at (908) 276-7300.

HELP NEW YORK CITY ATHEISTS GROW

If you can't come to one of our regular monthly meetings, please consider donating by mail.

Membership and our monthly newsletter are free, but we depend on donations to keep meetings and mailings going. Donation amounts are reported in the monthly Treasury report. To protect the anonymity of our members, donors will not be thanked by name unless they request otherwise.

Donations are non-tax-deductible, and checks must be made payable to "Josh Karpf" until NYC Atheists acquires a tax ID number. Mail to New York City Atheists, PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013.

Correspondence

Bruce Monson of Colorado Springs, founder of Freethought Firefighters International and author of the new *Freethought Today* column "Atheists in Foxholes," wants to find current atheist firefighters and the names of any atheist, agnostic, humanist, or freethinking firefighters who died in the World Trade Center attack. Contact him at bamonson@pcisys.net and see his Web site at www.freethoughtfirefighters.org

Atheists of Silicon Valley asks if any secular 9/11 memorials are planned in 2002.

Letters sent to "The View," Payless ShoeSource, Disney, and the Anti-Discrimination Support Network (on Star Jones), and to State Attorney General Elliot Spitzer (on kosher-law ruling), and Amy Velez.

Affiliation

American Atheists has accepted our application for affiliation, on which we voted at our April meeting. The benefits of affiliation are "announcement, when possible, of local event in American Atheists publications and other resources; assistance in arranging on-going programs; assistance in setting up new local organizations; reduced prices on American Atheist Press materials; reduced American Atheists first-year membership for affiliation participants." The Web page www.atheists.org/affiliation lists all current affiliated groups.

New York City Atheists is a local group with free membership but a local focus and few resources. American Atheists is a national group with an annual membership fee, a national focus, and many resources. To learn more about American Atheists, see the Web page www.atheists.org/membership.html or contact Joe Zamecki at (908) 276-7300 for further details.

New Meeting Space?

Frank, our usual waiter, has moved to Greece. His replacement was slow, making ordering late-afternoon food even less convenient.

The diner does not want us earlier, and some members haven't come to meetings because the diner does not meet their dietary needs or tastes.

Last year, two meetings had supported moving to rented space. Research then showed no available free public spaces, and that some rented conference rooms were available for around \$200-\$300 for a three-hour meeting. Last year, not a single library had free space for us. At last month's meeting, a member suggested city recreation centers. I have called several and only one, Alfred E. Smith on the eastern edge of Chinatown, may give us a room for a small donation, though not on a firm schedule. I inspected it last week. It is a gloomy room with three lunchroom tables, in a hard-to-find building very remote from all subways but the F, making it a long and confusing walk.

I plan to ask the next meeting for permission to pursue rented, weekend, Manhattan meeting space beginning in September. It will be easier to socialize, host speakers, and break into committees for activist work if we aren't trapped at tables ordering food we don't really want. Last year's cheapest and most-voted-on candidates were the West Village's Greenwich Village Center, the East Village's Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Community Center, and a couple of hotels.

Treasury

Late May's treasury balance was \$278.05. We spent \$45.67 to print and mail May's newsletter. We collected \$77 in donations at May's meeting (held the first week of June). As of late June the treasury balance is \$301.38, excluding the cost of this newsletter.

LISTEN TO "EQUAL TIME FOR FREETHOUGHT"

Sunday evenings at 6:30 P.M. on WBAI-FM radio (99.5). See the Web page foody.org/freethoughtradio.html for upcoming and past programs.

"Hallowed Ground Zero"

Religion is still the rule for observances at the site. In late March, on Good Friday, over 1,500 people walked across the Brooklyn Bridge from a church in Brooklyn to a church near ground zero in a "way of the cross" procession. Addressing the marchers, Mayor Michael Bloomberg compared the crucifixion story to New York City's ambition to rebuild. Also, in the pit itself, at the foot of the 20-foot-high cross made of steel girders recovered from the wreckage, recovery workers (the *Daily News* said "dozens" of them; the *New York Post* said 20) were led by Franciscan priest Brian Jordan in recitations of the stations of the cross. Months before, Jordan had made the cross a permanent fixture at what the *Daily News* has called "hallowed ground zero."

A rare secular event was the ceremonial end of the recovery efforts, held on Thursday, May 30. Beginning with a firefighter sounding five bells at four intervals, the department's signal that a firefighter has been killed, it continued with an ambulance carrying an empty, flag-draped rescue basket, plus a flatbed truck carrying the last surviving girder, a 58-ton column that was draped in the style of a coffin and bore a flag and flowers. Mayor Michael Bloomberg had insisted that the event be held in silence, though that was broken by participants applauding as the honor guard passed. None of the many elected officials and dignitaries present spoke; the only words uttered aloud called those assembled to attention. The only music was taps, and "America the Beautiful" played on bagpipes. Members of police and fire companies who still wanted a religious service attended masses and prayer breakfasts elsewhere.

The following Sunday began with Jordan's usual Sunday mass below the steel cross, at which a Julliard chorus sang the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." "You hear that Al Qaeda? Bin Laden?" Jordan said. "We'll have the last word -- amen!" Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, also present, added, "Please remember the faith that you have in God, in this country. This is why all these people died. Because they were such strong believers, and such brave people. They believed in the American dream, and you have to believe in that."

Then came an interfaith memorial service that the *Daily News* called "more personal and emotional in tone than the city's dignified and solemn" ceremony held on Thursday. Religious leaders tossed

flower petals and sprinkled holy water, and a NYPD-FDNY pipe and drum band played "Amazing Grace." "There's hope beyond the grave," said a presiding minister. Another minister, accompanied by a priest and a rabbi, later blessed the ground.

Many workers and volunteers, plus a redevelopment official, are campaigning to incorporate the steel cross (photo at bottom right) into the design of a planned permanent memorial at the site. Ed Malloy, a board member of the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. and president of the Building Construction and Trades Council of Greater New York, whose members cleared ground zero, also asked that the cross not be moved. The Port Authority, which owns the Trade Center site, said that if the cross is moved, "it will most likely be moved to a public place." "It's a symbol of faith, humanity, and freedom," said the born-again construction worker who had first noticed the crossed beams of steel in the wreckage. "There's nothing bad that can be said about that cross."

Parents of a firefighter killed September 11 did have something bad to say about George Stewart, a Bronx priest who led a memorial mass for their son. Stewart spent ten minutes of the mass speaking in defense of Charles Kavanagh, the city's highest-ranking cleric to be accused



in the Roman Catholic church's sex scandal. A friend of the late firefighter wrote an outraged letter to Stewart, who hid from the press thereafter.

The *New York Post* rhapsodized over the discovery in the rubble of "a page from the Bible that spoke of a tower that reached to the heavens. . . . The shocking revelation of faith and hope is 'a sign from God that he is still watching over us,' said [a] photographer and actor who found the passage from Genesis, about the Tower of Babel, amid the ruins."

At the request of New Mexico state senator Manny Aragon, the New York City government shipped two steel beams from the collapsed World Trade Center to Albuquerque, to help "rebuild" a Roman Catholic church bell tower there. (The church and its bell towers actually had been razed in the 1970s. The new bell tower is being built in a nearby former gymnasium into which the church had moved.) A local archbishop sprinkled the beams with holy water and sacred oil while someone hoisted a 60-by-40 foot American



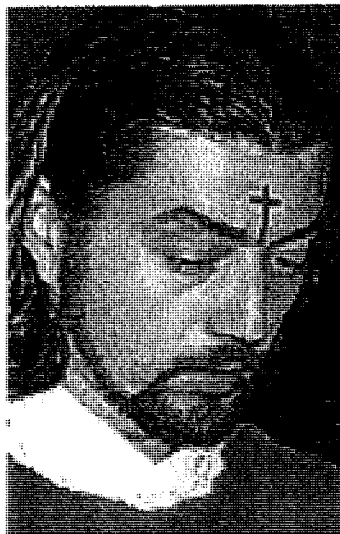
flag.

The *New York Times* described New Age practitioners cashing in on aftermath grief, reporting that, "in the aftermath of September 11, "the world of healers -- pop gurus, yogis, New Age nutritionists, herbalists . . . spawned the first wave of marketing that offers the promise of spiritual and physical peace, in exchange for cash and publicity." Deepak Chopra pitched his new novel about "love that survives death and suffering." Gurumayi's Web site expressed sorrow for the victims and then suggested "spiritual support" such as a \$108 prayer shawl, a \$19 mantra CD, and a \$15 Gurumayi lecture.

Sikhism was in the news. The four teenagers who burned to the ground the Sikh Gobind Sadan USA Temple, near Syracuse, because they thought the temple was named "Go Bin Laden," received sentences ranging from prison to community service. In "Sikhism Demystified," the *Daily News* went beyond the usual clarification that bearded, turbaned men are not necessarily Arabs. As described in the article by a Sikhism Promotion Mission representative, Sikh men never cut their head hair or facial hair and must always carry a comb, wear a steel bracelet, and carry a ceremonial dagger. The daggers, often carried inside a turban, have meant much friction after post-September security measures. Sikh men must wear "a particular kind of underwear" and pray several times a day. The Sikh primary scripture, the *Guru Granth*, is considered a living being, so Sikh temples are kept air-conditioned in summer, even when unoccupied, and its books are wrapped in quilts on cold nights "for the comfort of the holy texts." Although there are presumably Sikh women, the Sikhism Promotion Mission representative did not mention any.

Hindus too were newsworthy. Police, still skittish from last autumn's anthrax scares, asked organizers of the annual Phagwah Parade, which is Queens' largest parade and one of Hinduism's most festive celebrations, not to throw around the colorful powders unique to that holiday, which marks the coming of spring and the triumph of good over evil.

Zlatko Sudac, a Croatian priest (photo at top) who claims to have bleeding crucifixion stigmata (and to be able to heal, levitate, and be in two places simultaneously) and who has been on an eight-month local "mass tour," vaguely predicted further disaster. "Be careful this



summer," he said. "I am offering this holy mass for the protection of this land, your buildings, your airports, bridges, tunnels, your air, and your sea. . . . God does permit things during certain seasons." Although the Roman Catholic Church refuses to confirm (or deny) his claimed powers, it considers him as a counterforce during the priest crisis. "When many people's faith in the church has been shaken by scandal, he's been able to draw them back," said a friar who helped sponsor Sudac. "The crowds are tremendous and everybody loves him."

Sources: "Where Twin Towers Stood, a Silent Goodbye," *New York Times*, 5/31/02; "Solemn and Silent WTC Remembrance," *Daily News*, 5/31/02; "Silence Amid Tears," *Newsday*, 5/31/02; "Mourning and Prayers Near 16 Empty Acres," *New York Times*, 6/3/02; "Push on to Keep Cross at Ground Zero for Good," *Daily News*, 6/6/02; "Bible amid Rubble Is Testament to Faith," *New York Post*, 2/11/02; "Holy March Ends at WTC," *Daily News*, 3/30/02; "Good Friday March Honors 9/11 Victims," *New York Post*, 3/30/02; "It's Hallowed Ground Zero," *Daily News*, 3/31/02; "Rev. Riles Kin of 9/11 Hero," *Daily News*, 6/1/02; "Beams from World Trade Center Arrive to Help Demolished Church," Associated Press, 5/25/02; "Spiritual Balm, At Only \$23.95," *New York Times*, 10/21/01; "Teen to Help Rebuild Temple as Part of Sentencing," Associated Press, 4/19/02; "Last Temple Fire Suspect Admits Role," Associated Press, 5/28/02; "Sikhs Observe 'Biggest Day,'" *Newsday*, 4/15/02; "Sikhism Demystified," *Daily News*, 4/29/02; "Powder Nixed at Hindu Fest," *Daily News*, 3/27/02; "Priest Foresees Terror," *Daily News*, 5/22/02.

State Kosher Laws Rejected

New York State's kosher food laws unconstitutionally violate the separation of church and state, a federal appeals court ruled in late May. The appeals court found that the laws promoted religion and that they discriminated in favor of Orthodox Judaism, on which the kosher requirements were based.

The 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals decision upheld a July 2000 decision by a lower Brooklyn federal court. Ironically, this probable end to state regulation of kosher food was originally brought by kosher butchers who, after being fined for mislabeling meats as kosher, want to increase consumer access to kosher food and to preserve their free exercise of religion.

In other news, a Brooklyn kosher-food importer recalled 11 varieties of Israeli cheese after the Food and Drug Administration discovered listeria, a sometimes fatal food poisoning germ, in some batches. The cheeses were sold in kosher stores in New York and in several other states. Also, some local rabbis are warning Jews away from an Upper West Side kosher restaurant, and are threatening its kosher certification, because its menu refers to Lubavitcher grand rabbi Menachem Schneerson as a messiah. Most Jews consider messianic Lubavitchers' belief in an immortal or soon-to-be resurrected Schneerson as dangerously close to Christian theology, weakening the religious and kosher authority of that sect.

Luckily, New York State will no longer have a role in adjudicating such issues -- unless State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, who challenged the lower court ruling, also challenges the appeals court decision.

Sources: "Court: Food Laws Not Kosher," *Daily News*, 5/22/02; "Kosher Laws Unconstitutional," *New York Post*, 5/22/02; "Kosher Cheese Recalled," Associated Press, 3/21/02; "Messiah Is on the Menu, And a Deli Is in a Pickle," *Forward*, 5/24/02.

"Voodoo Powder" Figure: An Atheist Falsely Accused?

Amy Velez, a member of School Board 1 on Manhattan's Lower East Side, was ejected from the board by Schools Chancellor Harold Levy in January after another board member accused Velez of sprinkling "voodoo powder" in front of a school superintendent's office door.



Velez (see photo) has denied leaving any powder at the door of the superintendent, who is the focus of a controversy that has split that local school board. She also denies practicing voodoo, saying in one article, "I don't practice any religion." In another, she is said to call herself an atheist.

The Board of Education temporarily restored Velez to the board in late April. On June 5 the board voted 4 to 1 to reinstate her permanently, and called Levy's investigation flimsy and flawed.

Sources: "Voodoo Hoodoo in School Board Tiff," *Daily News*, 1/25/02; "Voodoo Spells School Bd. Ouster," *Daily News*, 3/16/02; "Voodoo' Firing Blamed on Racism," *Daily News*, 3/22/02; "School 'Voodoo' Booting Nixed," *Daily News*, 4/28/02; "Was It Voodoo? A Dispute Leads to a Board Dismissal," *New York Times*, 5/26/02; "Ed Board Overrules Levy in 'Voodoo Powder' Firing," *Daily News*, 6/6/02.

Attorney General Wants to Aid Religious Schools

In March, the *New York Post* revealed that State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer had spent several months looking for ways to provide taxpayer-funded remedial services to parochial-school students. The New York Catholic School Superintendents Association and two major organizations representing yeshivas, the Board of Jewish Education and Agudath Israel of America, have been pressing the state to provide remedial services to parochial-school students.

Now, Spitzer has released a "Report on Non-Public Education," which is available online at <http://www.oag.state.ny.us/press/reports/no>

n public schools report.pdf.

Half of the coauthors are secular educators, including Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers. The others are Catherine Hickey, superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of New York; minister Floyd Flake; John Ruskay, CEO of the UJA-Federation of New York; and David Zwiebel, Agudath Israel's executive vice president for government and public affairs. Spitzer contributed a legal opinion calling the proposals constitutional.

The report suggests that New York State provide tutoring by public school teachers for private school students needing remedial help meeting state standards, loans of computers, teacher training for those who administer state tests, and special education on private school premises. New York already funds transportation, lunches for needy children, and sometimes special education in private schools, including religious ones.

"That the highest-ranking legal authority in New York State issued a legal opinion that these programs don't create federal or state issues means that now we can engage in a dialogue on substance," gloated Zwiebel.

Civil libertarians reacted strongly to the report, saying that the results were stacked and could open the door to vouchers and other such aid. And a constitutional lawyer from the American Jewish Congress said, "They put together a panel foreordained to get these results. With the exception of Randi Weingarten, there's nobody there who's got an interest in the public schools, and hers is to make sure that they use public school teachers. There wasn't anyone there

committed to church-state separation as a primary goal. This is less an advisory committee than a cheering squad."

Sources: "Spitzer Weighs Aid to Church Schools," *New York Post*, 3/16/02; "N.Y. Panel Proposes Public Funding for Private Schools," *Jewish Week*, 6/7/02.

Hentoff Sees Wider Risk in Vouchers Case

Atheist columnist Nat Hentoff writes in two columns of the *Village Voice* that the Supreme Court, in the upcoming case *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, "will soon decide whether the constitutional separation of church and state will be largely dismantled."

The case will decide whether the city of Cleveland can grant tax money via vouchers (called "scholarships") so poor families can remove their children from failing public schools and put them in private schools, including religious schools. In this case, 99.4 percent of the children use vouchers to attend religious schools.

Hentoff rejects the arguments that vouchers increase parental choice, or that religious schools benefit only indirectly. He quotes the mission statements of Cleveland area religious schools that benefit from vouchers. For example, "The one cardinal objective of education to which all others point is to develop devotion to God about our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier" shows, says Hentoff, that "Jews, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics need not apply."

Hentoff says that the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, which the Supreme Court has previously said prohibits "excessive entanglement of government and religion," will be at wider risk if the court rules that payment to parents, instead of directly to schools, validates vouchers for religious schools. "There is no . . . continuing surveillance of any kind, and there are no restrictions on how the public money can be used. Therefore, with the uninspected, persistent blurring of church and state, all the limitations on church-state entanglement have been simply and sweepingly done away with."

Hentoff predicts a 5-4 vote in *Zelman*, "with Sandra Day O'Connor deciding whether to tear down much of what remains of that wall separating church and state."

He also noted that former mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried to force a New

York City voucher program, but that he was blocked by a New York case -- *Committee for Public Education v. Nyquist* (1973) -- "which until now has been, in the United States Supreme Court, the main bulwark against using public money for religious instruction in religious schools no matter whether the funds go directly or indirectly to those schools."

Sources: "Your Taxes for Church Schools?", *Village Voice*, 5/31/02; "Church and State Separation in Crisis," *Village Voice*, 6/7/02.

Religious Schools' Religious Tests

Nearly 80,000 parochial school students in the tri-state area recently took a grueling exam that tested their knowledge of Roman Catholic theology and ethics -- even though many such students are not even Catholic.

A *Daily News* article on the test described it as "the equivalent of a final exam in religion class" that measures knowledge of "religious trivia" and "assess[es] critical thinking skills by requiring students to write essays on matters of faith."

The article emphasized the strain of taking and preparing for the test "when students already fac[e] tougher state English and math exams." Even some teachers called the test "overkill." A parent said, "It seems like they are so scared of this test that they are growing to resent religion class."

The *Daily News* only briefly noted that non-Catholic students were required to take the exam. New York City Catholic schools began enrolling many such students, often low-income children of color, because the schools would have otherwise closed after white Catholic families abandoned the city for the suburbs.

Consideration of religious schools as alternatives to public schools should judge the value of religious training that displaces education in secular subjects.

Source: "Catholic Exams Test Kids' Faith," *Daily News*, 6/3/02.

Muslim-Hindu Tensions Aren't Local

As has often been reported before, New York City immigrants from India and Pakistan show few signs of tension despite the increasing threat of war, even nuclear war, between those two countries. "This is America, and everyone gets along here,"

said a Pakistani mortgage broker who is married to an Indian woman and was quoted by the *Daily News*. "Back in Pakistan, people are less educated and there is no such thing as Pakistanis getting along with people from India."

This is in great contrast to escalating local antagonism between presumably equally well-educated Muslims and Jews over the simmering religious crisis in the Middle East.

Source: "Indians and Pakistanis Are All Pals in Queens," *Daily News*, 6/1/02.

Censor Religion in Regents Exams?

The New York State Education Department was widely criticized early this month for silently altering, without knowledge or permission of authors or the knowledge of readers, excerpts of literature in Regents tests, which the state requires public high school students to take to graduate.

"The vast majority of the passages . . . had been sanitized of virtually any reference to race, religion, ethnicity, sex, nudity, alcohol, even the mildest profanity and just about anything that might offend someone for some reason," said a *New York Times* article exposing the bowdlerization. The Education Department said it had been applying "sensitivity guidelines" so no student would be "uncomfortable in a testing situation."

In some cases, Education Department editors excised religious references, deleting, for instance, all mention of Judaism from excerpts of books by Isaac Bashevis Singer. They also removed concepts that might offend religious people, for instance, in another author's

work, replacing "hell" with "heck" in one sentence and excising references to sex, religion, nudity, and potential violence, even when such references were essential to understanding the passage.

In response to the criticism, the state education commissioner said that there would no longer be such alterations in state-administered tests. But the state board is not alone in censoring potentially offensive educational material. For decades, American publishers have eliminated sexual, religious, and racial references from their textbooks and tests. For instance, the religious right objects to stories that introduce fantasy, witchcraft, the occult, sex, or religious practices different from its own.

Should religion be presented as an approved cultural norm in public educational material? Should it be censored in excerpts of religious writing? Should religious writing be included in such material in the first place?

Sources: "The Elderly Man and the Sea? Test Sanitizes Literary Texts," *New York Times*, 6/2/02; "Educational Insensitivity," *New York Times*, 6/5/02; "New York Exams to Regain Intact Literary Passages," *New York Times*, 6/5/02.

Christian Aid to Foreign Poor Debunked

Late last month, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof wrote an Op-Ed essay praising "evangelicals" for progressive work as the "new internationalists" in fighting hunger, AIDS, and slavery abroad, although Kristof did also criticize their "simple-minded moralistic streak" that has led to economic sanctions against poor countries and opposition to birth control. The next week, two Columbia University professors who had just returned from a visit to South Africa challenged Kristof in a letter to the editor. Activists there, said the letter writers, complained that most American fundamentalists are less involved in fighting AIDS and poverty than in "spending enormous amounts of money building mega-churches able to handle thousands of converts, and that the message they are pushing includes restricting the reproductive rights of South African women and prevention policies other than abstinence."

Sources: "Following God Abroad," *New York Times*, 5/21/02; "Evangelical 'Missions'," *New York Times*, 5/27/02.