

ers. And it forces you to wonder: if it's this easy to *fake* the stuff we're supposed to respect, well . . . does it mean that that stuff might be fake, too?

Things deprived suddenly of their supposed meaning, of the place assigned to them in the so-called order of things, . . . make us laugh. In origin, laughter is thus of the devil's domain. It has something malicious about it (things suddenly turning out different from what they pretended to be), but to some extent also a beneficent relief (things are less weighty than they appeared to be letting us live more freely, no longer oppressing us with their austere seriousness). [Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*]

*MAD* was born from austere seriousness. In the early 1950s, moral crusaders and a Senate Judiciary Committee shut down publisher William Gaines's horror comics, leaving him with nothing but *MAD* to publish. Co-founder Harvey Kurtzman turned it into a magazine before leaving after a few issues, so Al Feldstein took over.

American humor was liberating itself from vaudeville wheezes to address subjects previously off-limits,

like racial prejudice, famine, incompetent rulers, and nuclear war. Under the light of television and the shadow of the Bomb—or vice versa—a thousand satirists bloomed, ranging from theatrical groups (The Compass, Second City) and comedians (Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce) to writers (Terry Southern, Joseph Heller) and cartoonists (Jules Pfeiffer). It was a field that many reviled as “sick” or “black.”

Tony Hendra, whose own pedigree includes the Cambridge Footlights and the *National Lampoon*, outlined the history of this Black Plague in his engaging *Going Too Far*. At the time, what Hendra calls “Boomer humor” had a clandestine feel of shared strangeness, where the practitioners and audience alike were “sending up flares for one another, tentatively drumming out messages in the night, leaving notes in hollow trees; ‘I too am a Martian.’” John F. Kennedy may have talked about passing a torch to a new generation . . . but the people in charge didn't want that generation playing with matches.

Somewhere between the ages of eight and twelve, kids realize how intim-

idating the world is going to be. They have the sincere desire that life will be able to provide some positive magic for them. And they've grown into the capability to understand a good, enticing explanation for it all. It's usually at this age that Catholics are confirmed, Jews are mitzvah'd, techies read Ayn Rand, and the lucky tribes get the peyote but-tons.

This is the other reason why we're talking about it here. *MAD* has spent fifty years reaching those isolated young Martians who are wondering about that real-and-fake question. Don't look for some higher morality behind *MAD*, as though satire were some kind of public service program, like polio shots. *MAD* told us that it was *all* fake—governments lie, religions are gibberish, corporations sell you garbage for a quick buck, the world is in the hands of idiots and con men, and even your own parents are *lying* to you most of the time. *MAD* has cultivated millions of doubters, skeptics, anarchists, and *cynical little bastards* among several generations of America's kids.

*MAD* has given us the Devil's Laughter. **ff**

## A HOLLOW VISION ON CHURCH AND STATE

**Why I Am Not a Secularist**, by William E. Connolly (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 210 pp. Cloth \$29.95 ISBN 081663312, paper \$19.95 ISBN 081663320.

Expect to hear a lot about *Why I Am Not a Secularist*. This influential postmodern critique is already spawning approving neoconservative seminars. Its author, a professor of political science at Johns Hopkins, is an atheist who adds a novel thrust to familiar neoconservative claims that America is “outgrowing” secularism. Stripped of its worst postmodern excesses, Connolly's analysis will be echoed by many opponents of church-state separation.

To secularists, church-state separation benefits not only the church but the state as well. Democratic debate demands compromise, yet zealous religious belief can make compromise

impossible. Therefore in the presence of religious diversity, a protected forum is required from which the language, claims, and value judgments of religion can be excluded. Only thus can the people's business go forward unimpeded by sectarian contention. To be sure, this approach has its difficulties: While religion engages believers' deepest metaphysical and ethical commitments, secularism requires participants in public debate to accept a pact to eschew religious appeals.

Connolly makes the most of those difficulties. He begins with the familiar neoconservative argument from “moral capital”: American democracy relies on a Tocquevillian ethical deposit that sprang from Christianity and is now being depleted. Neoconservatives like Richard John Neuhaus and Irving Kristol see this as reason to return to social Christianity. The postmodern Connolly seeks a “deep plurality” or, as he often calls it, *plurivocality* (a plurality of voices). From this perspective

comes the second, and unique, thrust of his argument: Connolly argues that modern secularism erodes diversity. It is limited by the presumptions of the Christian milieu in which it arose, while its clumsy attempts to erect a *cordon sanitaire* around the public square stand in the way of full-throated social dialogue.

Connolly slings postmodernist jargon with a heavy hand. “To change an intersubjective ethos significantly is to modify the instinctive subjectivities and intersubjectivities in which it is set,” he writes. “But this may sound like mumbo jumbo to many secularists” (p. 28). No comment. Anti-science is a postmodern staple, but Connolly raises the bar with his seemingly serious contention that “several human brains” are “involved in our thought-imbued emotional life” (p. 28). He describes the amygdala as “a small, almond-shaped brain” (p. 28) and speaks knowingly of “higher brains such as the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex” (p. 175). The stomach is

a brain, too (p. 175). "Since the multiple brains in each human have a complex social structure, with numerous sites existing in domestic, foreign, and war-like relations, you work on several registers of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in relation to each other" (p. 176). To do this work, Connolly counsels shamanistic "arts of the self" inspired equally by Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. Again, the secularist's bloodless rationalism only gets in the way.

Secularism fails because it shortchanges "the visceral register" (p. 3). It is deaf to the power of intuitive moral responses like disgust. Connolly calls instead for a polity of the receptive yet thick-skinned, an ideal society in which each person's deepest religious or metaphysical convictions can become the stuff of public debate. Under his "multidimensional pluralism," "many partisans affirm without deep resentment the contestable character of the fundamental faith they honor most" (p. 39). This is a plea for multilateral epistemological humility, yet it's never clear how Connolly hopes to achieve it without the metaphysical buffering that secularism provides.

**Democratic debate requires protection against the divisive, ultimately nonnegotiable demands of faith.**

Staunch believers in exclusivistic creeds generally refuse to acknowledge the "uncertainty and profound contestability" of their own worldviews (p. 185). Though Connolly disapproves, millions of people *do* "insist upon the incontrovertibility" of their creeds (p. 187). Therein lies the fatal flaw in his argument – and the reason why a religiously diverse democracy needs secularism. Democratic debate requires protection against the divisive, ultimately nonnegotiable demands of faith. Connolly thinks it "unrealistic . . . to pretend to bypass this dimension of politics" (p. 187). I'd suggest that secularism's way of shielding democratic debate from pious absolutism is absolutely necessary. At least, it is in a world where human beings have only one brain.

—Tom Flynn

## DEFICIENT DIRECTORY

**Who's Who in Hell: A Handbook and International Directory for Humanists, Freethinkers, Naturalists, Rationalists, and Non-Theists, compiled by Warren Allen Smith (New York: Barricade, 2000), \$125.**

This volume purports to be both an encyclopedia of nonbelievers past and a directory of nonbelievers present. It is marred by its unfortunate title; even though written with tongue in cheek, it is sure to stoke the fires of the critics of unbelievers. There are many inaccuracies in the work, and they are excessive. For example, the volume never mentions that Michael Ruse has written books on Darwinism, nor does it give his year of birth. It leaves out a line in its listing of Thomas Flynn and most signers of *Humanist Manifesto 2000*. It does not mention the fact of James Farmer's death in 1999, nor that he was a leader in the civil rights movement and a signer of *Humanist Manifesto II*. The section on Gilbert Ryle does not cite his most important book, *The Ghost in the Machine*. There are many other egregious errors and omissions, almost on every page. If only the editor had checked the facts carefully before publication. This volume is not without some merit, though as a reference work it is seriously deficient in scholarship. Warren Allen Smith is to be congratulated for conceiving of the need for such a directory. However, it should have been impartial. Rather, it is full of Smith's own subjective predilections, gossip, and innuendo rather than objective citations.

## CHOCOLAT 1, GOD 0

**Chocolat. Directed by Lasse Hallström. Screenplay by Robert Nelson Jacobs. Novel by Joanne Harris.**

This is the fairytale-like story of a single mother (Juliette Binoche) who blows into a small French town with her young daughter (Victoire Thivisol) during Lent, and opens up a chocolate shop. She uses an old Mayan recipe that sparks the passions within her patrons, thereby causing the local stiff (most of the town) to get their girdles in a bunch. Lent, after all, is a time of

denial, not indulgence.

The mayor (Alfred Molina) takes a particular disliking to Juliette and gets most of the townies believing she's Hitler, Mussolini, and Howard Stern all rolled up into one. Nevertheless, Judi Dench, who plays Juliette's cranky landlord, takes a liking to the Queen of Candy, as do a few other select townsfolk who appreciate her unconditional friendship—not to mention her Viagra-in-a-bonbon (forty years before its time.)

In case Alfred didn't have enough reasons to be sanctimonious, enter Johnny Depp as the rugged Irish river rat, who is roundly hated by the inhabitants of whatever shore he docks at (despite his charms and good looks). Of course, Johnny and Juliette hit it off, which only chaps the hides of the intolerance league even more.

Anyway, the forces of rigidity and dogma clash with those of tolerance and compassion, and t & c win because they're more fun to be around. The End.

I don't mean to belittle this story, because it's well done in many ways. On the surface, *Chocolat* is nicely shot, well-acted, and features music that both fits and entertains. Jacobs's script is solid and effective.

A bit deeper, we find a clear message about how dogma and authority should never supersede the warmer aspects of our humanity. A woman who only seeks to bring moments of pleasure to a drab little town is widely condemned because pleasure is thought to distance one from God. Juliette's flat-out rejection of an invitation to attend church early in the movie places her squarely in the enemy camp. Someone mentions the "A" (atheist) word soon after, and the leap to ill-repute becomes a short one from there.

Believers will probably come out of this thinking that this is another example of God's true message being mangled by his misguided followers. Secular humanists will more likely see themselves in the persecuted woman's shoes, and pine for a world where religion couldn't have started this mess in the first place.

The moral of this story is to see or rent *Chocolat* if you get the chance. It's lip-smacking good.

—James Underdown **fi**