

I think that the law should allow me to use narcotics, but should forbid me from killing whales and prevent me from enclosing small boys' penises in my mouth. Those who want to break the law in the name of religion should still—like me—have to tell their stories to a judge. Once we begin to allow exemptions, what is to prevent the courts from allowing female genital mutilation, as well, to animist and Muslim congregations, polygamy and child marriage among Mormons, and criminal medical negligence among Christian Scientists and Jehovah's Witnesses?

I was profoundly shocked, at a recent panel on secularism, to hear Peter Steinfels—the liberal Catholic religion

correspondent of *The New York Times*—say that the case of the New York *mohel* was potentially a case of the free exercise of religion. And this is what I mean about liberal assistance in our continuing cultural suicide. Hardly anybody could be found to challenge Bush's Supreme Court nominations, or the wider imposition of a religious test, lest certain "communities" be upset. And, on the Steinfels principle, we are currently storing up immense future trouble for ourselves by—for instance—permitting the distribution of extremist Wahhabi editions of the Qur'an, with public money, in the prison system.

Instead of a constitutional system that safeguards all religions and subsi-

dizes or supports none, we have allowed the emergence of a state-sponsored "faith-based" racket that indulges all cults and beliefs and is suspicious or contemptuous only of the secular. And all this is in the name of multiculturalism. It is not enough to point the finger at the Religious Right here: the tolerant and plural society is being forced to watch its own principles being used to undermine itself. The need for an aggressive secularism has never been plainer, and we really must begin to insist that we, too, can be "offended." **fi**

Christopher Hitchens is a columnist for Vanity Fair. His most recent book is Thomas Jefferson: Author of America.

KATRINA VOSS

Thank You, Science

I am a meteorologist and an atheist. The second description often leads my colleagues to the assumption that I must have been a morose and recalcitrant teenager given to substance abuse and fruitless existential wanderings or that I arrived, despondent, at this conclusion after a dictatorial religious rearing.

On the contrary, I was raised by a pantheistic scientist mother and an atheist father who introduced me to evolution and Darwinian natural selection when I was six years old. I am told that I announced my grasp of the material with the triumphant declaration that my father did indeed "look a little bit more like a monkey than I do."

In later years (and with a more mature understanding of our simian ancestry), my mother, an entomologist, took me with her to dig fire-ant mounds. On Sundays, while my young cohorts sat in church, my mother showed me strange and wonderful pictures from a scanning electron microscope. While my friends learned about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I learned about



the Head, the Thorax, and the Abdomen. From the beginning, I knew, with however little sophistication, that salvation was to be found in the natural world.

So, when I began to study meteorology, I was already a sort of biologist-by-proxy, and my transference to another branch of natural science should have been smooth. Instead, it was a paradigm shift of the highest order. Science, as I understood it, required a myopic eye. It was about tiny things with tiny parts and elaborate relationships. Meteorology, it

seemed, required one to look up and out, to blur the world intentionally. The leap from the microworld of biology to the macroworld of meteorology was a difficult one at first, but, once I made it, I began to see the striking similarities.

When I first saw infrared, water vapor, and satellite pictures, I was reminded of those electron-microscope photographs of cells my mother had shown me. Whether reduced or expanded to a size more accessible to the human eye, there was an almost artistic correlation. Both worlds seemed comprised of circles and those circles of intricate chains. Both worlds followed rules and had recognizable cycles. Both the cellular world and the world of meteorology had patterns.

Early in my studies, I had to wonder: was there, perhaps, some critical, exquisite moment when the earliest sky-gazers grasped that very pattern? Was there a sudden revelation, a lifting of a veil that exposed, ironically, the pattern that was there all along in the fluid and colorful skies?

We know that science has parented a large and able brood, and that meteorology is but one of science's many children—albeit one with many faltering starts, from Aristotle's *Meteorologica* to the advent of weather satellites. Meteorology could even have been the

firstborn, in terms of primogeniture, as it were, for looking *up* would produce the very first itch of scientific questioning. After all, *up* and *out* are always accessible and on permanent, unavoidable exhibition. There, ancient students would seek divine signs, but, in time, they would see signs of a different sort—signs written in the language of clouds, a language that would eventually be codified and put to use. With so grand a template for natural patterns, the smaller-scale patterns would become more obvious.

I suppose the order in which our intellectual forebears looked (first up, then down, then in?) is at this point of little importance. The point is, *they looked*. When evil spirits were replaced with viruses and bacteria, biology cultivated a new regard for the body. Likewise, meteorology cultivated a new regard for the sky, not as a playground for a capricious deity but as a page upon which important messages were being written. What was once the whim of an elusive god is now the decipherable code of scientific laws

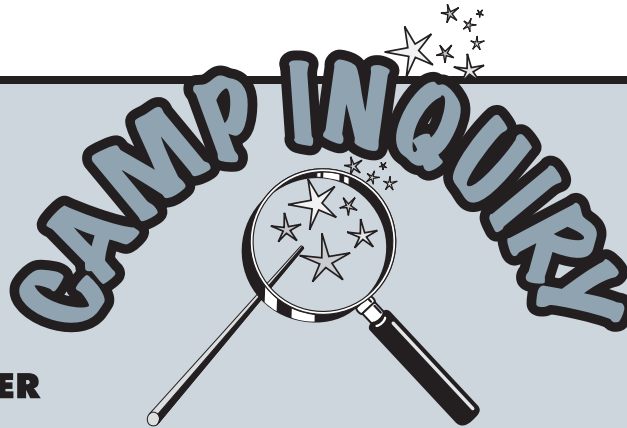
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in a changing atmosphere. This code has allowed us to predict and to plan for disasters, to sow and to harvest, and to find associations between climate and disease. It has made possible less lofty pursuits as well. It has told us how to dress and has facilitated expert preparation for bad-hair days.

I am a meteorologist and an atheist. I am also a grateful beneficiary of science and all its trappings. Thank you, science, for a cured kidney infection. Thank you, science, for my straight, white teeth that have undoubtedly advanced my career in television.

Thank you, science, for extending the lives of beloved pets, for computers, for air conditioning, for SPF-15 moisturizer, and for waterproof mascara. Thank you, science, for the many forms of birth control that have freed women from the tyranny of our own bodies, the tyranny once attributed either to a brutish, male god or to a fickle and domineering mother-goddess. Thank you, science, for the very freedom we have to study science in the first place. **fi**

Katrina Voss holds bachelor's degrees in Spanish literature and geosciences and meteorology. She currently works as a meteorologist and can be seen mornings on CNBC's Wake-Up Call, Squawk Box, and Morning Call, as well as on AccuWeather.com and numerous English- and Spanish-language stations, including Univision's San Francisco, Fresno, and Monterey, California, stations. She writes an online column for AccuWeather.com called "The Extra-Meteorological Affair."



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