February 3, 2008

THE ETHICIST

Much About History

By RANDY COHEN

I’m a history professor — my period is 1500-1800 — with an M.A. student who wants to pursue a doctorate. While she is smart and capable, she is very religious, subscribing to the “young earth” theory that the world is only 6,000 years old. I am to work with her for a year and then recommend her to Ph.D. programs. Must I do so if I find her views incongruent with those of historians? — NAME WITHHELD, CALIFORNIA

Unless your student’s religious beliefs impair her work — and you don’t suggest they do — they are irrelevant. You should judge her on her scholarship, not her spiritual life. If she were studying the Sumerians, she might have a hard time working out how they accomplished so much so soon after the earth was formed, what with all those dinosaurs running around trampling the pottery. But this young-earth nonsense need not mar her understanding of, say, Oliver Cromwell or, indeed, much else in your period.

We all harbor irreconcilable ideas. (People are no damn good, but I’m a fine fellow. Being overweight is a grave threat to my health — please pass the doughnuts. Life is short — let’s watch TV.) Yet most of us get along pretty well. (Except for those fat guys stuffing themselves in front of “Deal or No Deal.” They’re no damn good.) What’s more, people have an impressive ability to compartmentalize. If your student can indulge her religious notions in church on Sunday and do great work in the library on Monday, more power to her.

You might regard your year together as a chance to teach a promising scholar to sharpen her critical reasoning, that vital tool of the trade, and thus to reconsider this young-earth nuttiness.

I wanted to buy a painting at a local gallery and was told it was “under consideration” by someone else, but since that person had not made a deposit, I could buy it. I paid and planned to pick it up at the end of the exhibition. Days later, the gallery said it was returning my money because the other prospect had purchased the work. I later learned this buyer wrote a positive review of the exhibition in the local paper. Did the gallery act ethically? — S.N., ONTARIO

If your facts are correct and the painting was not reserved — if this was not just a merry mix-up — then the gallery misbehaved. Having concluded a deal with you and accepted your check, it must keep its word. Also discreditable: to give special treatment to a critic reviewing the exhibition, conduct so close to a bribe as to be, well, a bribe. Or at least a reward for a favor performed, carrying with it delicious hints of benefits to flow from future positive reviews.

The critic, too, is culpable, violating professional ethics by reviewing an exhibition that includes work he or she owns, or is about to own, a conflict of interest. Ladling on the praise can drive up the price of a painting.

Similarly, food critics eager to invest in my cookie recipe would have to recuse themselves from reviewing Pecan...
Randies, a totally original — and exquisitely delicious — cookie, unrelated to so-called Pecan Sandies, no matter what those lawyers say.

Send your queries to ethicist@nytimes.com or The Ethicist, The New York Times Magazine, 620 Eighth Avenue, 6th Floor, New York, NY 10018, and include a daytime phone number.