

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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July, 2010

Big questions this month: How relevant is God? Why did He create atheists? Is He fixing horse races? What has He got against football? How to explain the Trinity? Or the universe? Or Kim Jong Il or Arizona? We have a newbie nominee for a Dumbth award, as well as a perennial contender. Some fun before our summer vacation (Happy Fourth! – page 12), leavened by the serious situation in Amherst (page 2). But let's lead this month with some genuinely big – and happy – news. – JR

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**WE ARE NOW A CHARTER CHAPTER OF THE  
AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION  
(Yes, we're still very much affiliated with CSH)**

**John Rafferty**

The Secular Humanist Society of New York, since its inception in 1988, has been affiliated with the Council for Secular Humanism, the nationwide humanist organization that was founded and led by philosopher Paul Kurtz until his recent resignation.

Make no mistake: In spite of the current mess in Amherst (page 2 *et seq*), SHSNY is committed to CSH, to its future, its growth and its success.

We're not leaving home, but we are making new friends, starting a new, extended family.

A few months ago Jason Torpy, who is not only an SHSNY member but a member of the Board of Directors of the American Humanist Association, suggested to me that "you guys should join the AHA." Quickly thereafter I got an email from the AHA Grassroots Coordinator with the same suggestion, and a few days later a follow-up invitation to meet with AHA Executive Director Roy Speckhardt. AHA was obviously interested in us.

Lee Loshak, Art Harris and I had breakfast one morning in April with Roy, and exchanged ideas. An e-mail poll of the SHSNY board that afternoon produced a unanimous "Why not?" and on April 17 seven SHSNY members – Elaine Lynn, Lee Loshak, Jason Torpy, Lorraine Gudas, John Wagner, Bob Murtha and I – petitioned the AHA to become a Charter Chapter.

At its national meeting last month, the AHA board made it official. They – I mean "We" (I have to learn to start saying "We") are looking forward to big things.

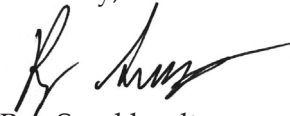
**GREETINGS FROM THE AMERICAN  
HUMANIST ASSOCIATION!**

At our recent board meeting in San Jose, California we added 10 local groups to the AHA's network, more than at any previous such meeting, taking us over the 140 mark. Among them was your group, the Secular Humanist Society of New York, and I couldn't be more pleased about this particular addition.

Modern humanism has a long history in New York City, perhaps beginning there during the days of Charles Potter, when he founded the First Humanist Society of New York, whose advisory board included Julian Huxley, John Dewey, Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann. The American Humanist Association had a leading voice in New York when Corliss Lamont led an active group there for many years. We're happy that we'll again have a strong foothold in the Big Apple.

We look forward to working with your group to provide advice and resources that will help you grow and thrive. Please feel free to contact me with any questions, concerns or ideas.

Sincerely,



Roy Speckhardt  
Executive Director

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**BOARD OF DIRECTORS:** John Rafferty, *President/Editor*; Elaine Lynn, *Vice President/Secretary*; Donna Marxer, *Treasurer*; Remo Cosentino; Arthur Harris; Lee Loshak; Irv Millman; Robert A. Murtha, Jr.

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SHSNY is an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism, and a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association.

## SECULARIST SCHISM WIDENS, THREATENING A MOVEMENT'S FINANCES – AND FUTURE?

David Gibson

(Reprinted from *PoliticsDaily.com*, 6/12/2010)

For decades, and long before the recent arrival of ballyhooed and bully “New Atheists” like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, Paul Kurtz and the secular humanist movement that he birthed in the 1970s represented the gravitational center of unbelief in America.

While atheist leaders like the late Madalyn Murray O’Hair grabbed headlines with her court battles against prayer in schools—and almost any other fight she could pick—Kurtz, a retired University of Buffalo philosophy professor with a scholar’s bearing and 50 books to his name, was developing a far-flung network of skeptics, agnostics, secularists and other “non-theists.”

He was also building an imposing infrastructure of secular humanism—a “mini-empire,” as *The Buffalo News* recently called it, that includes two magazines, a publishing house and affiliated institutions under the aegis of the Center for Inquiry, the internationally renowned hub of humanism, based in Amherst, outside Buffalo.

But now Paul Kurtz is gone from the Center for Inquiry (CFI) and its affiliated publications and organizations, resigning last month after losing a lengthy power struggle with CFI’s board of directors, and the movement he leaves behind isn’t looking too good either.

“It’s been a shattering blow,” Kurtz said in a recent telephone interview. “I founded that organization.”

The upheaval at CFI was largely the culmination of years of tensions between Kurtz, now 84, and his designated successor at CFI, Ronald A. Lindsay. On one level, the drama is one of those all-too-common stories of an organization working to make the transition from a charismatic founder to the next generation of leadership. Such changeovers can become nasty personality clashes, and the conflict between Kurtz and Lindsay was all that and more.

Yet to many the split also underscores a serious and widening schism in the broader community of non-believers, between those who want civil engagement with people of faith, and even cooperation where possible, and atheist “fundamentalists” (as Kurtz and the old guard call them)—true believers in godlessness who belittle religion and religious people at every turn, and yet by doing so can wind up sounding like the very enemy they are trying to defeat.

“They’re dogmatic,” Kurtz said of those at CFI who he contends are narrowing the broader scope of secular humanism, which embraces a range of non-religious and irreligious people. “I don’t think the Center for Inquiry, which [includes] leading scholars and scientists in the world, that we should resort to that. We should provide important, informative, thoughtful criticism.”

In the short term, the internecine battle with Kurtz appears to have come at a high cost for CFI and its related organizations, the Council for Secular Humanism and its research arm, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. All are

based in Amherst, though CFI has offices and programs around the country, along with national and international chapters and affiliates.

On June 1, Lindsay published an urgent appeal on CFI’s website, revealing that the organization was suddenly facing an \$800,000 shortfall, equivalent to 25 percent of the annual budget. The gap was due to the failure of an anonymous funder to provide his or her expected annual donation.

For months, Lindsay said, he had tried to contact the donor but heard nothing, and so he began to fear the worst -- that the donation would not be forthcoming, and that if it was not due to the poor economy, it was because the donor did not like the way the CFI was dealing with Paul Kurtz.

By the end of May, Lindsay couldn’t wait any longer, and in his June 1 post he asked for donations to forestall “immediate drastic reductions in expenditures.”

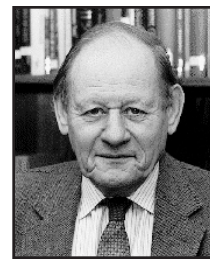
On June 10, Lindsay told me the appeal had generated about \$50,000 in donations, not nearly enough to stave off deep cuts, but a hopeful first step toward a goal of about \$250,000. Additional money could be drawn from CFI’s endowment, currently valued at about \$7.5 million, Lindsay said, though the organization hopes to avoid that option.

Kurtz says he takes no satisfaction in the travails of the organizations he founded, but he also says the problems are not surprising. He says they are a function of what he sees as a shift in tone away from the seriousness of purpose and positive approach that marked CFI’s original vision. That shift, he said, coincides with the rise of the “New Atheists,” like Richard Dawkins, who *Politics Daily* profiled last year, and Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett --sometimes jokingly referred to as the Four Horsemen of the Atheist Apocalypse.

Those writers are best-selling authors and, in the case of Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris, in particular, sharp-tongued polemicists whose fierce and witty (to some) denunciations of religion earn them headlines and criticism, but also a devoted following among like-minded unbelievers who see them as gurus of godlessness.

Kurtz thinks CFI has taken that same low road with campaigns, like last fall’s “Blasphemy Day” and a “Free Expression Cartoon Contest” that last March gave its top prize to a drawing of a mitered bishop ogling a rank of altar boys.

“What has happened is that there is increasingly an effort to focus on criticism of religion,” Kurtz told me. “Although we” —he was referring to secular humanists like himself, who hold varying opinions on the supernatural— “are skeptical of religion, we nonetheless have a positive statement to make. We want to work with religious people solving our planetary problems. This represents a basic philosophical difference.” He added: “I don’t believe we should ridicule religion. To focus on that is degrading.”



Paul Kurtz

But Lindsay rejected Kurtz's charges. "It is a total mischaracterization to say we've changed the mission," Lindsay said in a telephone interview. "We're doing the same things we did when Paul was in charge."

Lindsay did say that since CFI represents a "broad-based group" that includes the "New Atheists" as well as "moderate" secular humanists. He said that CFI's approach was viewed "more as a question of what's appropriate at different times and places" and that some of CFI's initiatives, like the blasphemy prize, reflected the tenor of the times.

Lindsay's efforts have drawn some sharp criticism from secular humanists and others who support Kurtz's approach, like R. Joseph Hoffman, a well-known secular humanist who in a blistering blog post in May called for Lindsay's resignation.



**Ron Lindsay**

Other commentators, however, accused Kurtz of being disingenuous at best with his criticisms, saying he is the one who has changed and has lost his edge. (The outré atheist and biology professor P.Z. Myers said Kurtz's complaints caused him to wonder "who

chopped Kurtz's balls off.")

Comments on CFI's blogs also offer a sense of the heated debate – and underscore the fractious nature of the non-theist community and their laudable penchant for openly debating everything. But Lindsay dismisses any broader meaning to the dispute with Kurtz.

"I think there is definitely some disagreement within the non-religious community about the approach to take toward religion," Lindsay said. "There is that going on. I just don't think that's what's happening here."

For example, Lindsay blames Kurtz for failing to help secure the large annual donation that has gone missing, a task Lindsay says had been part of Kurtz's job description. He said that he even told Kurtz at one point that he—Lindsay—would resign by the end of the year if Kurtz could secure the money from the major funder.

"I know he sees me as the villain and he's very unhappy that I am here," Lindsay said. "It's very unfortunate. But we have to carry on."

The dispute between Lindsay and Kurtz has been festering for two years, almost since the board of directors named Lindsay as chief executive in June 2008 at the request of Kurtz himself, who has known Lindsay for 25 years. Until 2008 Kurtz had been both chief executive and chairman of the board of CFI, with complete control over operations, and the board wanted to diversify the authority structure, Lindsay said. But, he added, "Paul simply did not want to give up any significant authority. And it spiraled from that. ... Nothing apparently could be done to satisfy him."

Lindsay accused Kurtz of repeatedly plotting against him, and of increasingly speaking out in CFI's publications and on its blog against the direction of the organization. But in a showdown in June 2009 the board backed Lindsay and Kurtz was removed as board chair and given an emeritus

title, though he still had a say in the editorial content of the center's magazines, *Free Inquiry* and *Skeptical Inquirer*. (Kurtz's son, Jonathan, also left the board, though he still runs the publishing company, Prometheus Books.)

Tensions came to a head last month when Kurtz wrote a lead editorial for the June/July issue of *Free Inquiry*, titling the piece "Toward a Kinder and Gentler Humanism" and declaring that "buffoonery" should have no place at CFI. Lindsay shot back with a testy blog post in which he called Kurtz "intellectually dishonest" and said his "constant carping and false claims" were discouraging donors and leading to cutbacks.

A short time later the split was final, and on May 18 Kurtz sent an email to friends announcing his resignation. "I have already been shorn of all effective authority in these organizations and magazines and 'shoved on an ice floe' so to speak, so it is merely a formality to divest myself of any pretensions that I have anything any longer to say within the organizations or magazines that I founded," he wrote.

CFI issued a brief statement thanking Kurtz but also noting concerns about his "day-to-day management of the organization." The fate of CFI remains up in the air, though Lindsay and others seem confident that they can rebound without losing too much in the way of their influence or their endowment.

The wider debate among secularists over whether to engage religious believers, or whether snark and sneer are the best ways to defeat faith and rally unbelievers to atheism, seems destined to continue. That does not bode well for a community that is growing faster than any U.S. religion—Americans claiming no religion went from 8.2 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2008—but one which is also characterized by myriad shades of unbelief and often united only by a desire to debate everything and a disinclination to join anything that resembles a church. And among that 15 percent, true atheists like Dawkins and company comprise just a small fraction.

For his part, Kurtz says he feels as youthful as ever, having just completed two books, and he is launching a new organization, the Institute for Science and Human Values, to advance a "kinder, gentler" humanism and to continue his life project of enunciating a "planetary ethics" that could join believers and nonbelievers alike in projects to help society and save the environment.

"All through my life I've worked with religious people," Kurtz said, adding with a laugh: "I find my relationship with religious people far more friendly now than with many humanists."

*Comment: I consider Mr. Gibson's essay (above) well-balanced and informative about the much-heat, little-light controversy that has been roiling the secular community for months, which is why it has been given more single-issue space than any other essay since I took up the job as PIQUE's editor. That said, there are several points that readers new to the controversy should know.*

*First, Paul Kurtz, without whom there would not be a Council for Secular Humanism, a Center for Inquiry or,*

perhaps, even an American secular humanist movement, was treated shabbily. Second, it's hard to identify any of the leading lights in the secular community—outside the present CFI/CSH leadership structure in Amherst—who have not sided with Paul. Third, not only has the money dried up, but people are leaving and offices are closing. Norm Allen, Jr., the founder and director of African-Americans for Humanism, was summarily fired. Among others, Leo Igwe, founder and director of CFI-Nigeria, has resigned in protest. And although Amherst denied a report in Humanist Network News that CFI offices in Washington and Tampa were closing, mail to CFI-New York is being returned by the post office.

Things do not look good.

I am no fan of Paul Kurtz's new "Neo-Humanism" and have been bothered ever since I first became active in SHSNY by the lack of support, or even recognition of, and communication with, the "locals" by the Kurtz regime at the secular Vatican in Amherst. Information-please phone calls and emails were never – repeat, never – returned, and, until a few months ago, SHSNY's listing on the CSH website was eight years out of date. However, after Paul Kurtz was "kicked upstairs" I received (as did every CSH leader) both snail mail and emails from CSH Exec Dir Tom Flynn and Pres/CEO Ron Lindsay promising – well, more promises.

If Paul Kurtz had to be sacrificed for the good of CFI and CSH, when does the good start happening? – John Rafferty

### **KURTZ'S "KINDER, GENTLER" HUMANISM IS THE RIGHT TACK TO TAKE**

**Chic Schissel**

It seems the "old humanists" are being taken to task by the "new atheists" for daring to suggest that the cause of humanism could be advanced by not simply being negative about religion but, in Paul Kurtz's words, by "emphasizing what we are for rather than against." Austin Dacey (PIQUE, June) accuses Kurtz of wanting "a single new institution" to replace religion, and Dacey's words are echoed by Barbara Lifton in the same issue.

But I don't read Kurtz that way. He's not promoting any "single new institution." I feel that he recommends pointing out positive alternatives to religious belief, simply to make it easier and more attractive for the devout to give up their religious nonsense. In our country the intense vitriol of the new atheists has not succeeded in diminishing religious belief; quite the contrary. Religion is getting stronger here. I think Paul Kurtz's proposals are more likely to succeed.

### **VATICAN HAIKU**

**Donna Marxer**

Hail the Vatican!

A great country for old men,  
not for little boys.

### **Arizona 1:**

### **ARIZONA NUN EXCOMMUNICATED FOR SAVING A (MOTHER OF FOUR) WOMAN'S LIFE**

**John Rafferty**

*(Based on reporting in The Arizona Republic and RH Reality Check on alternet.org)*

In a last-minute, life-or-death drama in late 2009, a patient at St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix—who had a rare and often fatal condition in which a pregnancy can cause the death of the mother—was allowed to have an abortion to save her life.

Sister Margaret McBride, who was vice president of mission integration at the hospital and a member of the hospital's ethics committee, was part of a group, including the patient and doctors, who decided upon the abortion, which saved the patient's life. Sister Margaret was summarily fired ("re-assigned") by Phoenix Diocese head Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted, who said she was "automatically excommunicated."

*Thesis:* Rev. John Ehrich, medical ethics director for the Diocese of Phoenix, argued: "She consented in the murder of an unborn child. There are some situations where the mother may in fact die along with her child."

*Antithesis:* If the woman had died, not only would her four children be motherless, but the 11-week old fetus would not have survived either.

*Synthesis:* The Church, run by misogynists in skirts, has protected hundreds of (male) pedophile priests from prosecution, even after decades of testimony by thousands of victims whose childhoods were destroyed, yet will instantly fire, disgrace and bar from Heaven forever a single (female) nun who acted only to save a life.

### **Arizona 2:**

### **WHITE-WASHING**

*(Excerpted from huffingtonpost.com and The Arizona Republic, 6/6 and 6/8/2010)*

A "Go on Green" mural was painted across two walls outside Miller Valley Elementary School in Prescott (AZ) last month. The mural was designed to advertise a campaign for environmentally friendly transportation, and featured portraits of four children, including a Hispanic boy and a black one.

But when passing motorists daily shouted racial epithets at the artists and schoolchildren working on the mural, and City Councilman Steve ("Why is a black guy in the middle?") Blair led a campaign to remove the mural on his radio talk show, school principal Jeff Lane caved, and pressed the project director to "fix shading" in the faces of the non-white children.

"Fix shading" why? Officially, to make the children's faces appear happier and brighter, "to look like the children are coming into light."

Baloney. That may be the politically-correct way to explain the white-washing—literal and metaphorical

—but in reality the principal and the school district caved in to the racist, xenophobic pressures that have swept through the entire state.

However, sometimes the bad guys lose, and after protests erupted, the mural is being restored to its “original theme.” What’s more, Principal Jeff Lane, along with school superintendent Kevin Karp, showed up at a protest rally on June 9 to apologize for giving in to whims of mentally deranged adults.

And Councilman Blair lost his radio show. *Yes!*

Arizona 3:

### GEORGE WASHINGTON AND ABE LINCOLN: TRASH-TALKING HOMOPHOBES

**A**t a Memorial Day gathering honoring fallen servicemen, Yuma (AZ) mayor Al Krieger spoke against repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”:

*“I cannot believe that a bunch of lacy-drawered, limp-wristed people could do what those men have done in the past.”*

Bad enough? Wait. A week later:

*“I am reluctant to compare myself to George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, but I did get some feedback on what I said, and I don’t believe I said anything different than what they would have said.”*

### AND SPEAKING (STUPIDLY) OF “DADT” ...

*(Based on the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, stltoday.com and MSNBC’s The Rachel Maddow Show, 6/14/10)*

**M**issouri Congressman Ike Skelton, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who last month was one of only a handful of Democrats to vote against ending “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” has found yet another reason to prolong the discrimination.

A national discussion about gay service members, he told reporters, might put “mommies and daddies” in a tough spot. “What do mommies and daddies say to their 7-year-old child?” Skelton asked.

So, to spare ignorant and/or bigoted parents any embarrassment – and because Ike Skelton is weirded out by gays – an estimated 14,000 service men and women already “out” will be fired this year.

### ALABAMA REFUSES TO CONCEDE “STUPIDEST STATE” STATUS TO ARIZONA

**A** math teacher at Corner High School in Jefferson County, Alabama, decided the best way to teach his students about “parallel lines and angles” would be to have them calculate the best angle to use when firing a gun at President Barack Obama.

He was visited by the Secret Service, which determined that he wasn’t a real threat.

*Comment: Not much of a role model, either. And can you imagine the right-wing media-sphere heads exploding if a “liberal” teacher had taught the same thing in, say, 2005?*

### OUR NEWEST DUMBTH NOMINEE CONFUSES (PROTO-FASCIST) FICTION WITH REALITY

**M**et Chuck DeVore, California state legislator and local Tea Party favorite who wants to imprison and torture more people at Guantanamo and who, while campaigning for the Republican U.S. Senate nomination to face Barbara Boxer in November, ran a commercial that asked voters:



**Chuck DeVore**

*“Ask yourself this question, Jack Bauer fans: which person would Jack want as his U.S. Senator?”*

The “Jack Bauer” Mr. DeVore refers to—for those of you who have just returned from several years on another planet—is/was the hero of “24,” a recently-ended Fox TV series that delighted couch-potato patriots with scenes of dark-skinned terrorists being tortured (by “Jack Bauer”) to reveal the whereabouts of, say, the bomb that was about to obliterate Los Angeles.

Luckily for all of us back in reality, Mr. DeVore came in third in the primary, losing to Carly Fiorina, who is what passes for a “moderate” in California Republican politics.

And by the way, Chuck, Kiefer Sutherland, the actor who played “Jack Bauer,” is a Canadian democratic socialist, and a supporter of Canada’s left-wing New Democratic Party. Just thought you’d like to know.

### WAIT, WAIT ... DON’T EVER COUNT NEWT OUT

**W**e were beginning to worry. Here it was, nearly five full months into the year, and Newt Gingrich hadn’t yet submitted his bid for the 2009 SHSNY Dumbth Award.

But not to worry, on May 23 the old pro came through on “Fox News Sunday”:

*“The secular socialist machine represents as great a threat to America as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union once did.”*

Even Fox’s Chris Wallace, was gobsmacked:

*“Mr. Speaker, respectfully, isn’t that wildly over the top?”*

Not for Newt.

Congratulations on your third nomination, Mr. Ex-Speaker, and good luck in the year-end balloting.

*And while we’re on the subject of right-wing nuts ...*

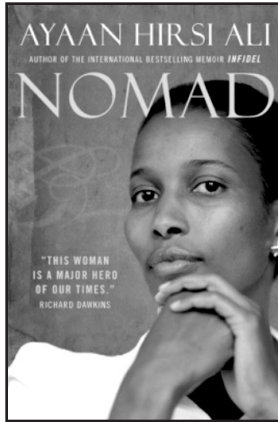
### RUSH LIMBAUGH, 59, ♥ KATHRYN ROGERS, 33

**C**ongratulations to anti-gay-marriage crusader Rush Limbaugh on his fourth traditional marriage.

And kudos, Rush, for paying a reported cool million to the world’s best-known gay man to entertain all the assembled bigots at your wedding.

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB: JULY - SEPTEMBER 2010

*Notice: Change of plans! The paperback edition of Massimo Pigliucci's "Nonsense on Stilts" has temporarily sold out (congratulations, Massimo!), so we'll reschedule our Honorary Member's book for Fall.*



**THURSDAY, JULY 8,  
6:30 - 8:00 p.m.**  
**The SHSNY Book Club meets at  
The Muhlenberg Branch Library  
209 West 23 Street (at 7th Ave.)  
to discuss  
NOMAD:  
From Islam to America:  
A Personal Journey Through the  
Clash of Civilizations  
by Ayaan Hirsi Ali**

Hirsi Ali follows up *Infidel*, which described her transition from obedient Muslim woman to international feminist, with a closer look at her nomadic journey from Somalia to Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia to Kenya to Holland – where she was a member of parliament – and now the U.S. But she offers a broader picture of the lives of other Muslim immigrants to put her own life in perspective. Hirsi Ali details the high cost to her family of the clash of cultures in the Islamic diaspora: estrangement from her parents, her sister's depressions and early death, her brother's crumbled prospects beneath the weight of outsize expectations. She offers an intimate look at the dynamics of Muslim families, their tendency to isolate themselves out of fear of persecution, and how and why so many young men turn to radical Islam. Exploring Muslim attitudes on money, sex, and violence, Hirsi Ali identifies the public schools, feminist movement, and Christian church as the institutions that can most effectively help Muslim families transition to Western nations.

*Join us even if you haven't finished reading.  
The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!*

*Every SHSNY Book Club is a Book Swap, too.  
Bring the books gathering dust on your shelves and  
take your pick of other readers' castaways.  
The leftovers? Donated to the Library.*

### **What book(s) would you like to read and discuss?**

Anyone can suggest any book that would be of interest to our secular humanist readers, and everyone's opinion is valued. Final choices are made by our Book Club Editor, Elaine Lynn, but please email your suggestions to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org)

**Thursday, August 19, 6:30-8:00  
at the Muhlenberg Library  
THEORY AND REALITY:  
An Introduction to the  
Philosophy of Science  
by Peter Godfrey-Smith**

How does science work? Does it tell us what the world is "really" like? What makes it different from other ways of understanding the universe? Peter Godfrey-Smith addresses these questions by taking the reader on a grand tour of one hundred years of debate about science. The result is a completely accessible introduction to the main themes of the philosophy of science. "A stimulating introduction to nearly every department of general philosophy of science. . . . Godfrey-Smith's attempt to inject new vigor and liveliness into philosophy of science is quite successful . . . A very fresh and well-conceived book."

**Thursday, Sept. 16, 6:30-8:00  
at the Muhlenberg Library  
AMERICAN GOSPEL:  
God, the Founding Fathers, and  
the Making of a Nation  
by John Meacham**

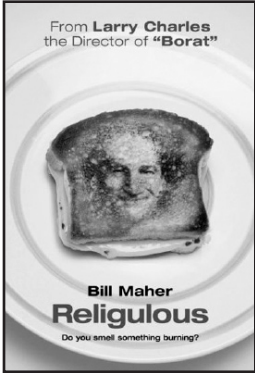
In his *American Gospel*, Jon Meacham provides a refreshingly clear, balanced, and wise historical portrait of religion and American politics at exactly the moment when such fairness and understanding are much needed. Anyone who doubts the relevance of history to our own time has only to read this exceptional book. – *David McCullough, author of 1776.*

An absorbing narrative full of vivid characters and fresh thinking. ... For me this book was non-stop reading. – *Elaine Pagels*

... an insightful and eloquent account. – *Tom Brokaw*

# SHSNY CALENDAR: JULY - SEPTEMBER 2010

**MONDAY, JULY 19, 7:00 p.m.**  
**SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**RELIGULOUS**



Politically provocative talk show host (and way-out-of-the-closet atheist) Bill Maher skewers the current state of organized religion in

this hot-button 2008 documentary that derives its title from a blend of the words "religion" and "ridiculous." Starting in America's Bible Belt with visits to fundamentalist and evangelical Christian groups (including an interview with a deluded young man who plays "Jesus" in a creationist theme park), and making stops in Jerusalem, the Vatican and other "holy" destinations, Maher travels the world to talk to believers from a variety of faiths to find out why they're so sure their religion is right — and so certain others are wrong.

More than 100 members of various freethought groups and Meetups watched "Religulous" together at two locations on its premiere weekend in NYC in 2008, and while many agreed that Maher took easy shots at some groups, almost all agreed that the film is devastatingly funny.

SHSNY Movie Night is free, but Stone Creek's management expects a "one drink minimum" per person for the use of their back room.

Check out the Stone Creek menu and prices online at [www.stonecreeknyc.com](http://www.stonecreeknyc.com).

**SUNDAY, JULY 18**  
**and**  
**SUNDAY, AUGUST 15**  
**12:30 p.m.**  
**OUR MONTHLY SHSNY**  
**BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER**

We'll gather again at Wild Ginger restaurant ("Asian fusion at its best"), 226 East 51 Street, between 2nd and 3rd Avenues.

Everyone interested in getting together with 20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good pan-Asian food and lively talk in a charming East-side setting, is welcome. Bring friends!

Order off the menu; individual checks.

*September brunch: 9/19*

**MONDAY, AUGUST 9, 7:00 pm**  
**SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**THE FOUNTAINHEAD**

Here's one for the Libertarians — the 1949 hit movie based on Ayn Rand's novel that is still best-selling on college campuses.



Gary Cooper stoically (some might say woodenly) portrays uncompromising architect Howard Roark, a man obedient solely to his own individuality and unfettered expression. Roark's life is depicted as a series of trials in which he must defend his beliefs and artistic integrity. Patricia Neal co-stars (beautifully) as the seductively fearsome Dominique Francon, the woman who tries to defeat Roark before falling in love.

## OTHER EVENTS

### Sundays:

*Religion on the Line*

6-9:00 a.m. — WMCA, 770 AM

*Equal Time for Freethought*

6:30 p.m. — WBAI-NY 99.5FM

*Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*

6:30 p.m. — Channel 13

### Wednesdays:

*Atheism History Week - 5:30 p.m.*

Hosted by SHSNY President John Rafferty. On MNN Channel 57 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at [www.mnn.org](http://www.mnn.org)

### Thursdays:

*NYCity Atheists TV - 7:00 p.m.*

*Atheist Book Club - 7:30 p.m.,*

hosted by SHSNY VP/Secretary Elaine Lynn. Both on MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at [www.mnn.org](http://www.mnn.org)

### Fridays:

*Drinking With Atheists* — Meet every Friday Night, at a venue to be announced, with like-minded friends for a fun evening of conversation. Details at:

[www.meetup.com/RichiesList/](http://www.meetup.com/RichiesList/)

### Various Dates & Times:

*Agnostic A.A.* — Seven A.A.-endorsed meetings. Schedules: [agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html](http://agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html)

## FOR UPDATES ON ALL SHSNY EVENTS ...

... check the website at [www.shsnyc.org](http://www.shsnyc.org) and/or 212-308-2165 and/or our MeetUp site at <http://humanism.meetup.com/155/>

Check Richie's List, too, at <http://atheists.meetup.com/515/>

## IS GOD IRRELEVANT?

Davidson Loehr

(From *Religion Dispatches*, on [alternet.org](http://alternet.org), 6/14/2010)

While the media still milks the chattering and snarling between theists and atheists, most people are bored by this show, and many have quietly moved into a more productive position. Growing numbers of people don't particularly care whether or not there are gods since, even if there are, they don't seem able to do anything in our world. If they're omnipotent, they appear to be indifferent to the small and large-scale wars, tragedies, and slaughters around us. If they're impotent, who needs them?

Even when people are reflexively tempted to thank God for saving them from a disaster that may have killed hundreds or thousands of other people, they don't want to say it too loudly — because they know someone may ask them, rhetorically, what their God had against the thousands he let die. Even bromides about God have lost much of their usefulness.

Still, with or without gods, we cannot escape the existential questions that have underwritten all the religions—and most civil codes of law—throughout human history:

Who am I?

What am I serving that will outlive me and carry my love and my work forward?

How should I live so that when I look back on my life, whether a year or decades from now, I can honestly be glad I've lived the way I did?

Theologians, ministers, and active congregants may say, correctly, that their religions still offer some responses to these most basic human questions. But theologians and preachers can no longer claim (and anyway are no longer granted) any particular authority for their differing, often warring, prescriptions. Christine Wicker, author of *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation*, and David T. Stone, author of *The American Church in Crisis*, are among the authors citing research that shows a dismal picture of American religion:

- Christian churches are losing two million people a year.
- Between just 2000-2005, church attendance declined in all fifty states.
- No matter what people may tell pollsters about their church habits, when you count the bodies in the pews, fewer than 18 percent of Americans attend any church regularly; 82 percent don't.
- When asked to rate eleven groups in terms of respect, non-Christians rated evangelicals tenth. Only prostitutes ranked lower. After the stories of hypocritical preachers and political moralists caught with paid lovers, it might be interesting to ask the prostitutes about that ranking.

Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens are dismissed as “New Atheists” by many of the faithful. Others see them as today's prophets. As much as anything, their attacks seem like the moves of predators taking out the weakest members of the herd. Wherever we come down, we have become used to reading—or skipping—broad dismissals of religion like these:

*“There's no longer evidence for a need of God, even less of Christ. The so-called traditional churches look like they are dying.”*

*“A remarkable culture-shift has taken place around us. The most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western [culture]... Clearly, there is a new narrative, a post-Christian narrative, that is animating large portions of this society. The post-Christian narrative... is based on an understanding of history that presumes a less tolerant past and a more tolerant future, with the present as an important transitional step.”*

*“Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. Democracy requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason.”*

What gives these particular critiques more power is that, in fact, they don't come from atheists, but from people who are profoundly invested in religion. In order, these three quotes came from Pope Benedict XVI, Dr. R. Albert Mohler (president of the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, KY—one of the world's largest), and Barack Obama.

Like it or not, since the 19th century, religion has lost most of its authority as the go-to place for our enduring questions, yearnings, stories and role models. Other stories, other myths, other people have become not only more appealing, but also better at helping us frame our abiding questions and experiences.

In dangerous times, these young people identified with the heroes most able to inspire them, linking their plight with that of an imaginary Na'vi race light years and centuries away [*in the movie “Avatar.”*]. Younger people are surrounded by vivid and accessible myths that have taken the place of the Bible's traditional role in providing the framework and role models for our lives.

Throughout the 20th century, religion's stories lost their competitive edge. Books, movies, radio, television, and now (as in the case of James Cameron's “Avatar”) computer-generated images that can create a seamless blend of our world and a fantasy world, offering images and a moral that inspire hundreds of millions of people



around the world—people of any or no religion—with the role models and moral scripts for which they hunger.

Yes, there are also films from the dark side. “Unforgiven,” “Pulp Fiction,” and “No Country for Old Men” come to mind. But even in these movies where senseless evil wins, we know that these stories have crossed a line far beyond the moral and ethical acceptability: the overwhelming majority of us simply know better. The Bible also has many immoral and psychopathic stories; disobedient teenagers are stoned, non-virginal brides are sentenced to death, Yahweh orders the slaughter of every man, woman and child in a village—and worse. The point, in both cases, is that we do know the difference between good and evil well enough to know whether movies, religions, or world events have crossed over the line—at least after the adrenalin rush wears off. The worldwide outrage at the continuing saga of the sexual abuse of children by priests, covered up by their superiors—all the way up to and including the Pope—is a clear illustration.

#### *The Good News, Thanks to Evolutionary Sciences*

Scientific fields like ethology (comparative animal behavior) have observed, studied, and often filmed many interactions among animals including chimpanzees, bonobos, monkeys, dogs, rats, dolphins, hawks, elephants, and other species that we recognize immediately as akin to our own sense of fair play, fairness, empathy, and compassion. It is becoming clear that we get our cooperative and moral sensitivities from the same place we get our territoriality, sexual jealousy, and aggression. We weren’t born in “original sin” nor in “original blessing.” We were born with a mixed bag of potential that tilts toward goodness. In social animals like humans, apes, monkeys, dogs, dolphins, and thousands more, we are born incomplete, unfinished, and our potential requires some shaping from our societies. We’re born with the capacities for both good and evil, and “nature” can be either refined or fouled by our social environment. Surely this provides some insight as to why 4 percent of Americans are said to be sociopaths, 30-100 times more than in Asian countries.

While we are born with a human nature tilting toward good, we can cross over into evil with frightening ease. The well-documented story about the rise of Nazi Germany is as good a case as any. The German people were born neither better nor worse than people around the world. But they showed us the power of charismatic leaders in acquiescent societies, uniting the people in hatred against scapegoat groups that included Jews, Poles, Gypsies, homosexuals and intellectuals. Both the Catholic Church and the Protestant “German Christian” churches aided, abetted, and covered for the slaughter of millions of “God’s children.”

It is a bit ironic that sciences are beginning to present—with persuasive documentation (or video clips on YouTube)—evidence that other species behave better than this; that we are the only species that almost routinely kills many members of its own species. The complicity of most churches in Nazi Germany presents a poor argument that the churches have either the needed vision or moral courage to stand up to environments of government-manufactured fear. The good news here may come from our evolutionary sciences.

Primatologist Frans De Waal is one of the most respected and influential ethologists writing today, whose well-documented optimism is carried in some of his eight book titles. We are *Good Natured*, and are parts of the billion-year evolution of many forms of life on the Earth; we are now living, he says, in *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society*; we didn’t get our good and evil tendencies from the gods; we are born including both possibilities, and created our gods, religions and civil law codes to serve and teach our higher possibilities to us, our children and their children.

God may be losing his traditional role as the origin and judge of good and evil. But there is also good news. The fruit from that tree of the knowledge of good and evil is finally ripening. The mythical “Kingdom of Heaven” is, as Jesus said, not supernatural, not “coming.” It is the only place it could ever be: within and among us. That “kingdom” exists when we can treat all others as our brothers and sisters, children of God, and the fruits of life’s longing for itself.

Between strident theism and equally strident atheism, apatheism offers a third way. Maybe there are gods, maybe there aren’t; it doesn’t seem to matter. Both the roots and fruits of a good life are measured by laughter among friends, love among families, and serving compassionate values that can grant us, as the gods used to do a purposeful and satisfying life—here and now, rather than elsewhere and later.

### **WHY DID GOD CREATE ATHEISTS?**

**Greta Christina**

*(Excerpted from AlterNet, 6/5/2010)*

**W**hy did God create atheists? This is a question I always want to ask religious believers. (One of many questions, actually. “What evidence do you have that God is real?” and “Why are religious beliefs so different and so contradictory?” are also high on the list.)

If God is real, and religious believers are perceiving a real entity, why is anyone an atheist? Why don’t we all perceive him? If God is powerful enough to reach out to believers just by sending out his thoughts or love or whatever, why isn’t he powerful enough to reach all of us? Why is there anyone who doesn’t believe in him?

It seems to be a question that troubles many believers

as well. At least, it troubles them enough that they feel compelled to respond. ...

I've seen a couple of religious responses to this question. Neither of which is very satisfactory. But they keep coming up, so today I want to take them on.

### *Open Your Heart to Me, Baby*

For more traditional believers, the answer to why atheists exist is simple: Atheists have closed our hearts to God. God has reached out to atheists – but we don't want to believe. We want to pursue a selfish and sybaritic life, and don't want to obey God's laws (so say the real hard-liners), or we've been hurt by life or by religion, and we're rejecting God out of anger (so say the marginally more compassionate believers). But it's important that we have free will – so we have to be free to reject God as well as to accept him. God can't force us to believe. That would be cheating.

Uh huh. See, here's the problem with that.

For starters: This idea is totally unfalsifiable. There's no way to prove that you honestly gave religion a chance. Until we develop the technology to accurately record the inside of somebody's head and play it back in somebody else's, there's no way to prove that atheists are sincerely open-minded, willing to consider religion.

Atheists can say a hundred times, "Really, I'm telling you, I've looked at this carefully, I've meditated on it, I've examined the evidence, I've studied lots of different religions, and I just don't find any of it convincing." We can ask believers to give us good evidence or arguments for God. We can point out the pain and distress many of us went through when we let go of our beliefs – pain and distress that this "You've just closed your heart to God" trope seriously trivializes. We can even go out on a limb and point to the kinds of evidence that would convince us we were mistaken (something just about no religious believers are willing to do). But since we can't demonstrate the state of our minds and hearts, believers can always say, "You aren't sincere. Your mind and heart are closed."

There's no way to prove that they're wrong. It's an unfalsifiable hypothesis. ...

What's more, the "You've hardened your heart against God" trope is a perfect example of moving the goalposts. No matter how many times we gave God the old college try, we clearly haven't tried hard enough. I mean – we don't believe! If we'd tried hard enough, then obviously we'd believe! The fact that we don't believe is proof that we haven't tried hard enough. Q.E.D. (It's a fairly entertaining logical fallacy, actually: a unique blend of moving goalposts and circular reasoning. I'm kind of impressed.)

And then, of course, we have the niggling little problem of self-deception and rationalization.

The human mind is very prone to believing what it already believes. It's very prone to believing what it's been prompted to believe. And it's very prone to believing what it wants to believe. Rationalization is a deeply hard-wired part of how the human mind works, and while it's a surprisingly important part – among other things, it enables us to get on with our lives without being totally paralyzed

—it's something we always need to keep in mind when we're deciding if the things we believe are really true.

So if the only way to believe something is to try really, really hard? If what it takes to believe something is to "open your heart" – i.e., to put yourself in a state of suggestibility and wishful thinking? That's not a very good sign that this something is true. Quite the contrary.

If we care about whether the things we believe are true, if we want to be sure that we're not just fooling ourselves into believing what we already believe or what we want to believe, then the times we're trying really hard to convince ourselves of something? Those are exactly the times we should be most skeptical. That's not when we should be opening our hearts. That's when we should be on our guard.

The reality for me, and the reality for a whole lot of atheists? I am open to my mind being changed. Heck, I used to be a believer. I used to be more than just open to the idea of God – I used to believe in God. (Or something I was willing to call God.) In fact, it was my willingness to change my mind, my openness to reconsidering new possibilities, that led me to let go of my religious beliefs in the first place. And if someone can give me some really good reasons to change my mind back again, I will. ...

But "You just haven't opened your heart" is clearly a terrible explanation for why God would allow atheists to exist.

Are there any better ones?

*Ed: Part 2 of this essay will appear in September PIQUE.*

## TRINITARIANISM EXPLAINED

### R. Georges Delamontagne

*(Excerpted from "The Secular Humorist," in The Voice of Sanity, newsletter of the Upstate S.C. Secular Humanists, June, 2010)*

**T**rinitarianism is the belief that God is comprised of three separate and distinct entities, the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. Of the various mysteries attendant to my [Catholic] religious indoctrination, that of The Holy Trinity was the most difficult to understand and the most difficult to forget.

It was hard to forget because of the words one was taught to think and/or speak when performing the ritual knows as the Sign of the Cross. That ritual involves touching one's right hand to one's head and mumbling, "In the name of the Father ..." then moving one's hand to the chest/stomach area, preferably over the heart, and saying, "... and of the Son ..." and finally touching one's left shoulder, then the right, thereby completing the Sign of the Cross, and concluding with the words "... and the Holy Spirit."

Even though a good Catholic is expected to accept the mysteries as matters of faith, it's still difficult to resist the temptation of trying to figure out what the heck they really mean and how they came to be. Recently, I have

come to understand the origins of the mystery of The Holy Trinity. One day a few months ago a light went off in my head when the idea came to me that if "The Holy Trinity" is the *answer*, then what is the *question*?

And the question for the answer is: How many gods does it take to screw in a light bulb?

### THE SLASHDOT.COM EXPLANATION OF THE UNIVERSE

The universe was created by an all-powerful all-knowing being who came down to us in the form of a cosmic Jewish Zombie who was his own father, who can make you live forever if you symbolically eat his flesh and telepathically tell him you accept him as your master, so he can remove an evil force from your soul that is present in humanity because a rib-woman was convinced by a talking snake to eat from a magical tree.

### THE FIX WAS IN Alfred Henick

Yesterday (June 5), the Belmont Stakes horserace was run in front of a huge crowd in New York. The owner of the winning horse thanked God emotionally on television for letting her horse win, as is commonly done by many winners of athletic contests.

Here was I, betting on another horse after careful scrutiny of past performances, history of jockeys and trainers, track conditions, and an abundance of other "scientific" handicapping information, without even for a moment considering the powerful effect of the supernatural.

I think it's time for all good sports enthusiasts to respectfully request of our ecclesiastic leaders that they petition God to remove His influence from all athletic contests, in order to preserve the integrity of the sport.

Especially horseracing.

The authorities are extremely careful about the inappropriate introduction of outside influences on the outcome of a race, such as illegal medications, mechanical devices, incorrect sex or ownership information, etc., and yet the profound power of divine intervention is ignored.

I wonder if God also favors any of the horses for 2nd or 3rd positions in races. If not, I would advise all bettors to restrict themselves to only "place" or "show" bets if they want a fair shake.

So many outside individuals have been prosecuted and jailed for affecting the outcome of an athletic contest, is it fair to accept, without protest, the influence of God?

Separation of church and state is a uniformly accepted principle. Perhaps we should add separation of church and sports.

### WORLD CUP SOCCER NEWS FROM THE TALIBANS: RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR

John Rafferty

Hisbul Islam, the Islamist fundamentalist group that controls a significant swath of Somalia and has outlawed the playing of soccer and music, the ringing of school bells and the wearing of bras (PIQUE, May, 2010), has taken to enforcing its interdiction of what the non-American world calls football by arresting people caught watching on TV. Unconfirmed reports say that two of the people arrested have already been executed ... and *somebody* is responsible for killing four people by throwing a grenade into a crowded movie theater.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea to you realists) has sent a team (for the first time in 44 years) to the World Cup in South Africa, along with a large contingent of fans to cheer them on. What's more, live coverage of the games is being broadcast into the DPRK. Is the world's last Stalinist state opening up to the rest of the world? Well, no and no.

To prove that atheist totalitarianism is no different from the traditional religious kind, the coach of the NK team has weighed in on the omniscience and infallibility of Kim Jong Il. Coach says that the Dear Leader guides every move of the team by "facing toward South Africa" and "beaming his thoughts" directly to the coach.

Unfortunately for the NK team, the Dear Leader seems to be no better at football strategy than he is at the international kind: the DPRK lost its first game to Brazil, 2-1. (Many people, and not just North Koreans, consider that a victory - Americans will *never* understand soccer.)

And those identically-costumed, cheering fans who march *en bloc* in and out of the stands? A credible report says they're Chinese hired to impersonate Koreans.

### STATUE OF JESUS DESTROYED BY ACT OF GOD

A six-story-tall statue of Jesus that stood beside Interstate 75 near Cincinnati, Ohio, since 2004, was struck by lightning last month and totally destroyed by the ensuing fire.

The statue, one of the most popular tourist attractions in southwestern Ohio, was made of plastic foam and fiberglass. Because it depicted Jesus from the waist up, with his arms raised like a football referee, it was popularly known as "Touchdown Jesus."

*Comment: I'm trying to think of a football-related joke here, and I can't. "Maybe God's not a Cincinnati Bengals fan"? Nah, lame. Help, readers. Your comments solicited. - JR*



**INGERSOLL ON THE 1876 CENTENNIAL OF  
THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE  
JULY 4, 1876**

And what more [in the Declaration of Independence]? That the people are the source of political power. That was not only a revelation, but it was a revolution. It changed the ideas of people with regard to the source of political power. For the first time it made human beings men. What was the old idea? The old idea was that no political power came from, or in any manner belonged to, the people. The old idea was that the political power came from the clouds; that the political power came in some miraculous way from heaven; that it came down to kings, and queens, and robbers. That was the old idea. The nobles lived upon the labor of the people; the people had no rights; the nobles stole what they had and divided with the kings, and the kings pretended to divide what they stole with God Almighty. The source, then, of political power was from above. The people were responsible to the nobles, the nobles to the king, and the people had no political rights whatever, no more than the wild beasts of the forest. The kings were responsible to God; not to the people. The kings were responsible to the clouds; not to the toiling millions they robbed and plundered.

And our forefathers, in this Declaration of Inde-



**Robert  
Ingersoll**

pendence, reversed this thing, and said: No; the people, they are the source of political power, and their rulers, these presidents, these kings are but the agents and servants of the great sublime people.

For the first time, really, in the history of the world, the king was made to get off the throne and the people were royally seated thereon. The people became the sovereigns, and the old sovereigns became the servants and the agents of the people. It is hard for you and me now to even imagine the immense results of that change. It is hard for you and for me, at this day, to understand how thoroughly it had been ingrained in the brain of almost every man that the king had some wonderful right over him; that in some strange way the king owned him; that in some miraculous manner he belonged, body and soul, to somebody who rode on a horse, to somebody with epaulets on his shoulders and a tinsel crown upon his brainless head. — Robert G. Ingersoll, July 4, 1876

“The day that this country ceases to be free for irreligion, it will cease to be free for religion.” — Justice Robert H. Jackson (1892-1954), U. S. Supreme Court Justice

**REMINDER: NO PIQUE IN AUGUST**

The editor, as well as all our local and national staff, and all our correspondents and stringers in all our bureaus worldwide will be on vacation.

**We've joined the  
American Humanist  
Association  
Page 1**

**The Mess in Amherst  
Page 2**

**Mazeltov,  
Rush Limbaugh!  
Page 5**

**Reminder:  
No August PIQUE  
in August**

