

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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June, 2010

This month we celebrate our recent celebrations, a miracle in Brooklyn and miraculous messages on hen's eggs. We consider how religions evolve, and decide (surprise) they shouldn't be replaced (at least not by us). We reimagine the Tea Party, condemn Barack Obama (bigger surprise), and try to cancel Mother Teresa (no surprise). A Catholic assays the Catholic Church mess, a historian of religion imagines extraterrestrial ethics, and 225 scientists write us a letter about climate change. – JR

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## CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE INTEGRITY OF SCIENCE

*(The following letter, signed by 225 of the world's leading scientists, members of the National Academy of Sciences, was published in the journal Science, May 7, 2010. The lead signer is Pacific Institute president Peter Gleick.)*

**W**e are deeply disturbed by the recent escalation of political assaults on scientists in general and on climate scientists in particular. All citizens should understand some basic scientific facts. There is always some uncertainty associated with scientific conclusions; science never absolutely proves anything. When someone says that society should wait until scientists are absolutely certain before taking any action, it is the same as saying society should never take action. For a problem as potentially catastrophic as climate change, taking no action poses a dangerous risk for our planet.

Scientific conclusions derive from an understanding of basic laws supported by laboratory experiments, observations of nature, and mathematical and computer modeling. Like all human beings, scientists make mistakes, but the scientific process is designed to find and correct them. This process is inherently adversarial – scientists build reputations and gain recognition not only for supporting conventional wisdom, but even more so for demonstrating that the scientific consensus is wrong and that there is a better explanation. That's what Galileo, Pasteur, Darwin, and Einstein did. But when some conclusions have been thoroughly and deeply tested, questioned, and examined, they gain the status of "well-established theories" and are often spoken of as

"facts."

For instance, there is compelling scientific evidence that our planet is about 4.5 billion years old (the theory of the origin of Earth), that our universe was born from a single event about 14 billion years ago (the Big Bang theory), and that today's organisms evolved from ones living in the past (the theory of evolution). Even as these are overwhelmingly accepted by the scientific community, fame still awaits anyone who could show these theories to be wrong. Climate change now falls into this category: There is compelling, comprehensive, and consistent objective evidence that humans are changing the climate in ways that threaten our societies and the ecosystems on which we depend.

Many recent assaults on climate science and, more disturbingly, on climate scientists by climate change deniers are typically driven by special interests or dogma, not by an honest effort to provide an alternative theory that credibly satisfies the evidence. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other scientific assessments of climate change, which involve thousands of scientists producing massive and comprehensive reports, have, quite expectedly and normally, made some mistakes. When errors are pointed out, they are corrected. But there is nothing remotely identified in the recent events that changes the fundamental conclusions about climate change:

(i) The planet is warming due to increased concentrations of heat-trapping gases in our atmosphere. A snowy winter in Washington does not alter this fact.

(ii) Most of the increase in the concentration of these gases over the last century is due to human activities,

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especially the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation.

(iii) Natural causes always play a role in changing Earth's climate, but are now being overwhelmed by human-induced changes.

(iv) Warming the planet will cause many other climatic patterns to change at speeds unprecedented in modern times, including increasing rates of sea-level rise and alterations in the hydrologic cycle. Rising concentrations of carbon dioxide are making the oceans more acidic.

(v) The combination of these complex climate changes threatens coastal communities and cities, our food and water supplies, marine and freshwater ecosystems, forests, high mountain environments, and far more.

Much more can be, and has been, said by the world's scientific societies, national academies, and individuals, but these conclusions should be enough to indicate why scientists are concerned about what future generations will face from business-as-usual practices. We urge our policy-makers and the public to move forward immediately to address the causes of climate change, including the unrestrained burning of fossil fuels.

We also call for an end to McCarthy-like threats of criminal prosecution against our colleagues based on innuendo and guilt by association, the harassment of scientists by politicians seeking distractions to avoid taking action, and the outright lies being spread about them. Society has two choices: We can ignore the science and hide our heads in the sand and hope we are lucky, or we can act in the public interest to reduce the threat of global climate change quickly and substantively. The good news is that smart and effective actions are possible. But delay must not be an option.

### **WHAT IF THE TEA PARTY WAS "A BLACK THING"?**

**Tim Wise**

*(Excerpted from "Imagine if the Tea Party Was Black," at ephphatha-poetry.blogspot.com, 4/22/10, and forwarded by Remo Cosentino.)*

Let's play a game, shall we? The name of the game is "Imagine." The way it's played is simple: we'll envision recent happenings in the news, but then change them up a bit. Instead of envisioning white people as the main actors in the scenes we'll conjure—the ones who are driving the action—we'll envision black folks or other people of color instead. The object of the game is to imagine the public reaction to the events or incidents, if the main actors were of color, rather than white.

Whoever gains the most insight into the workings of race in America, at the end of the game, wins.

So let's begin.

Imagine that hundreds of black protesters were to descend upon Washington, DC, and Northern Virginia, just a few miles from the Capitol and White House, armed with AK-47s, assorted handguns, and ammunition. And imagine that some of these protesters—the black protesters—spoke of the need for political revolution, and possibly even armed conflict in the event that laws they didn't like were enforced by the government? Would these protesters—these black protesters with guns—be seen as brave defenders of the Second Amendment, or would they be viewed by most whites as a danger to the republic? What if they were Arab-Americans? ...

Imagine that white members of Congress, while walking to work, were surrounded by thousands of angry black people, one of whom proceeded to spit on one of those congressmen for not voting the way the black demonstrators desired. Would the protesters be seen as merely patriotic Americans voicing their opinions, or as an angry, potentially violent, and even insurrectionary mob? ...

Imagine that a rap artist were to say, in reference to a white president: "He's a piece of shit and I told him to suck on my machine gun." Because that's what rocker Ted Nugent said recently about President Obama. ...

Imagine that a black radio host were to suggest that the only way to get promoted in the administration of a white president is by "hating black people," or that a prominent white person had only endorsed a white presidential candidate as an act of racial bonding, or blamed a white president for a fight on a school bus in which a black kid was jumped by two white kids, or said that he wouldn't want to kill all conservatives, but rather, would like to leave just enough—"living fossils" as he called them—"so we will never forget what these people stood for." After all, these are things that Rush Limbaugh has said, about Barack Obama's administration, Colin Powell's endorsement of Barack Obama, a fight on a school bus in Belleville, Illinois, in which two black kids beat up a white kid, and about liberals, generally. ...

Imagine a black political commentator suggesting that the only thing the guy who flew his plane into the Austin, Texas IRS building did wrong was not blowing up Fox News instead. This is, after all, what Anne Coulter said about Tim McVeigh, when she noted that his only mistake was not blowing up *The New York Times*.

In other words, imagine that even one-third of the anger and vitriol currently being hurled at President Obama, by folks who are almost exclusively white, were being aimed, instead, at a white president, by people of color. How many whites viewing the anger, the hatred, the contempt for that white president would then wax eloquent about free speech, and the glories of democracy?

And how many would be calling for further crackdowns on thuggish behavior, and investigations into the radical agendas of those same people of color?

To ask any of these questions is to answer them. Protest is only seen as fundamentally American when those who have long had the luxury of seeing themselves as prototypically American engage in it. When the dangerous and dark “other” does so, however, it isn’t viewed as normal or natural, let alone patriotic. Which is why Rush Limbaugh could say, this past week, that the Tea Parties are the first time since the Civil War that ordinary, common Americans stood up for their rights: a statement that erases the normalcy and “American-ness” of blacks in the civil rights struggle, not to mention women in the fight for suffrage and equality, working people in the fight for better working conditions, and LGBT folks as they struggle to be treated as full and equal human beings.

And this, my friends, is what white privilege is all about. Game over.

### OKAY, FELLOW LIBERALS,

#### WHAT’S THE PARTY-LINE POSITION ON THIS?

(Excerpted from “License to Kill?” by David Cole in *The Nation*, May 3, 2010)

On April 6, *The New York Times* reported that the Obama administration had approved the targeted killing of an American cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki, who is suspected of encouraging and planning terrorist attacks against the United States. The news that the president had decided to kill an American without charges, without a jury, without a lawyer and without a trial has thus far stirred relatively little outcry. By contrast, President Bush’s assertion of the power to detain two Americans without trial—Yaser Hamdi and Jose Padilla—led to two Supreme Court cases and thousands of news articles, op-eds and talk-show debates. On April 13, *The Washington Post* editorial board defended the targeted-killing policy—even though we know precious little about its asserted legal justifications or scope.

In our peculiar post-9/11 world, it is apparently less controversial to kill a suspect in cold blood than to hold him in preventive detention. ...

A democracy that permits its president to adopt wholly secret procedures and secret authorities for killing its own members violates the very rule-of-law ideals that President Obama promised to uphold.

**Comment:** Bush’s actions were disgraceful – this act of Obama’s is worse. Wrong, wrong, *wrong!* – JR

**Solicitation:** Reader comments are solicited. E-mail your considered opinions, reasoned arguments or intemperate rants to editor@shsny.org, or snail mail to the PO Box on page 1.

## RELIGION AND THE DARWINIAN ALGORITHM

Alexander Nussbaum

The May 20 SHSNY Book Club selection was *In Gods We Trust*, by Scott Atran, who is quite right in viewing religion as a non-adaptive consequence of the basic adaptive functioning of human cognition. The psychology of delusion and superstition is in effect the psychology of the human mind. We evolved cognitive mechanisms to notice and attach significance to rare events. It is easy to see the survival benefits of this, as these events may be important and necessitate immediate action. However, the resultant cognitive fallacy, the attributing of particular significance and meaning to coincidences, is central to religion, and an unfortunate by-product.

Atran undervalues memetics. The Darwinian algorithm of replication with variability and non-random survival is responsible for all organized complexity, not just biological. Cognitions are information, as genes are information, and both are the product of the same basic process – the Darwinian Algorithm. A memetic theory of religions as self-sustaining, highly infectious “mind viruses” not only has great explanatory power but is actually complementary to the idea that religions are a by-product of systems that evolved for other purposes.

One can find dozens of Orthodox Jewish biology Ph.D.s who regard evolution as false and the biblical Noah story as fact. The concept of mind viruses elegantly explains this seeming paradox. Far from being in doubt in biology, the Darwinian algorithm of mutation, replication and selective survival constitutes the only device for producing organized complexity in any area, including the evolution of cultural beliefs.

Genes are units of biological evolution. Cognitions, likewise are units, “memes,” of an evolution—cultural evolution—using the same nondirected device responsible for all organized complexity.

As genes form bodies for their mutual benefit, memes form meme complexes, or “memeplexes,” for their mutual benefit. As stated by Susan Blackmore, “The most valuable of memeplexes include all of the arts and sports, transport and communications systems, political and monetary systems, literature and science. ... Some memes are almost entirely exploitative, or viral in nature, including chain letters and e-mail viruses ... Religions have a similar structure and this is why Dawkins refers to them as viruses of the mind.”

Atran asks, “How could evolution have favored wasteful investment in preposterous beliefs?” When we say religions did not evolve because of adaptive purposes, we really mean they did not evolve to bestow genetic survival. They were shaped by adaptive pressures, like all organized complexity, but their “goal” is self-survival. Religious ideas spread and “act” for their own benefit



(on a nonconscious level of course, but then genes are also nonconscious), using the acquirer as a temporary throwaway receptacle to further spread.

All devout adherents—and that includes “politically correct progressives” as much as fundamentalists—believe even more strongly in dogmas when all the evidence is against them. An answer to Atran’s question is Dawkins’ rhetorical question: “Is it possible that some religious doctrines are favored not in spite of being ridiculous but precisely because they are ridiculous?”

Borrowing a concept from biological evolution, the mind-numbing, sheer lunacy of a meme can be used as an adaptive advantage in its battle for survival and replication. Evolutionary theory had to deal with the problem of how animals evolved characteristics that interfere with physical survival. It was solved by Israeli biologist Amotz Zahavi, who realized that male peacocks, for example, evolved their preposterous tails precisely because they are burdensome, and so proclaim to females how fit and strong they are. Likewise, memes are maintained that proclaim, “I am so devoted to this religion that the more absurd its beliefs the more I’ll believe it.”

I, like Atran, would deny that the explanation for religion’s evolution lies in the survival benefits it bestows on its believers. Indeed a memetic explanation of religion would emphasize that it spreads not despite, but because of the deaths of its adherents. Secularism has bestowed so many gifts on the West, yet, puzzlingly, a secular West no longer has the energy to protect science, individual liberty or freedom of expression, traditionally secular values, from medieval barbarism. A host of virulent “isms” such as “multiculturalism” seem to have piggybacked on the secular memplex to leave us vulnerable to memplexes that will destroy all that Western civilization has accomplished.

Atran defines religion as “a community’s costly and hard-to-fake commitment to a counterfactual and counterintuitive world of supernatural agents who master people’s existential anxieties.” The definition is apt except for one thing: “supernatural” should be deleted; Marxism and a whole host of “isms” function as mind viruses, as religions.

Self destructive memplexes are hardly unknown, though by definition go extinct in time. Shakers, a protestant sect, forbade having children, so from a peak of over 6,000 adherents, in 2009 there were only three Shakers left. Is secularism a self-destructive memplex?

I “pray” not.

When they give you lined paper, write the other way.

– Miguel de Unanuno

When they said “Sit down,” we stood up.

– Bruce Springsteen

## OPPOSITION PAINTS ALABAMA POLITICIAN AS RATIONAL, SANE. HE DENIES IT.

The leading contender for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in Alabama is one Bradley Byrne, and his opponents are hitting him hard, as witness a television commercial whose voice-over announcer claims, in an incredulous, *can-you-believe-this?* tone ...

*“On the {Alabama state} school board Byrne supported teaching evolution, said ‘evolution best explains the origin of life,’ and even recently said the Bible is ‘only partially true.’”*

In response, of course, Byrne says that “As a member of the Alabama Board of Education, the record clearly shows that I fought to ensure the teaching of creationism in our school text books” and “I believe the Bible is the Word of God and that every single word of it is true.”

Can Bradley Byrne shake off the curse of rationality? Stay tuned.

## THE MONTH IN ISLAMIC CRAZY

Tracy Clark-Flory

(Excerpted from *salon.com*. 4/28/2010)

Last month, Iranian women were rebuked for causing earthquakes with their “immodest” dress. Not crazy enough for you? Wait, there’s more.

Now Tehran’s police chief, Brig. Hossien Sajedinia, considering the obvious fact that women can only get suntans by at times coming out from under total-body burqas, has declared:

*“In some areas of north Tehran we can see many suntanned women and young girls who look like walking mannequins. We are not going to tolerate this situation and will first warn those found in this manner and then arrest and imprison them.”*

Might I recommend a single tool of protest? SPF 85.

## SARAH PALIN FLUNKS MIDDLE-SCHOOL AMERICAN HISTORY. AGAIN.

(Reprinted from *HuffingtonPost.com*, 5/12/10)

Sarah Palin joined Fox News’s Bill O’Reilly recently to condemn the critics of the National Day of Prayer, saying that Judeo-Christian belief was the basis for American law and should continue to be used as a guiding force for creating future legislation.

According to Palin, the recent backlash against the National Day of Prayer is proof that some people are trying to enact a “fundamental transformation of America” and to “revisit and rewrite history” in order to shift the Christian nation away from its spiritual roots.

Palin’s advice: “Go back to what our founders and our founding documents meant—they’re quite clear—that we would create law based on the God of the bible and the ten commandments.”

**SHSNY'S "DAY OF REASON" BRUNCH  
WAS A SMASH SUCCESS**

Sunday, May 2, was gorgeous, the private room in historic Pete's Tavern was charming, the food was excellent (and reasonably priced), conversation flowed, new friendships were made and old ones renewed, and Jason Torpy—President of the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers (and SHSNY member)—entertained and instructed us all on the growing problems of bias against nontheists and aggressive Christian proselytizing in the U.S. military.



Left top: Jason Torpy explains. Left below: John Rafferty presides. Above (facing camera): Sylvia and Bob Murtha, Sam Milligan, Ed Henrion and Art Harris schmooze. Below: Ron and Ellen Duncan and a friend (who?) await lunch.

Serious subject, yes, but all in all a good time was had by all present. However, not everyone who promised to be present was. Several people without reservations were turned away at the door because we had 57 reservations for a room that holds 48 seats. Then 11 of the 17 people who reserved through Meetup sites didn't show up.



Promise: It'll never happen again.  
- JR



**NEW YORK'S "REASONABLES" TURNED OUT  
IN BIG NUMBERS FOR  
MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI'S NEW BOOK**

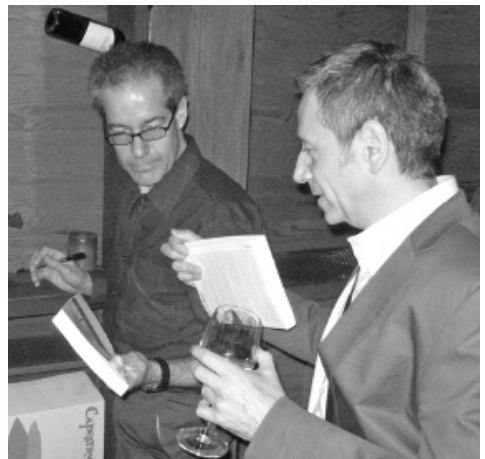
The ten freethought groups (including SHSNY) that comprise Reasonable New York all promoted the May 19 Book Signing Party for RNY Chairman Massimo Pigliucci's new book, *Nonsense On Stilts*, at Cellar 58.

The result - a full house at the 2nd Avenue trattoria, with 50 or more people of all ages meeting, mingling, making friends, munching on excellent complimentary Italian goodies, buying books (every available copy) and just having fun. Thanks to organizer John Broughton.

A huge social and sales success, great evening. - JR



Above: Massimo Pigliucci (right) socializes in the back-room wine cellar. Below left: Rich Sander, Beth Zucker and Brian Lemaire at the bar. Center: Gathering 'round the sangria and the busy bartender. Right: Massimo signs one for Tunç Iyriboz.



## SHSNY BOOK CLUB: JUNE - AUGUST 2010

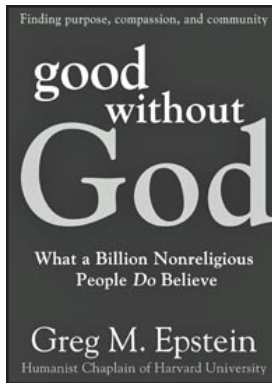
**THURSDAY, JUNE 17, 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.**

**The SHSNY Book Club meets at  
The Muhlenberg Branch Library  
209 West 23 Street (at 7th Ave.)**

**to discuss**

**GOOD WITHOUT GOD:**

***What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*  
by Greg M. Epstein**



The Humanist chaplain at Harvard, Epstein makes a bold claim for what nonbelievers — as many as a billion worldwide — do share and believe in *Good Without God*, the book that was the focus of our Coalition of Reason (including SHSNY) “A million New Yorkers are good without God” NYC subway poster campaign last fall.

Beyond Hitchens, Dawkins and Harris, at a time when debates about faith, reason, morality, and spirituality rage more fiercely than ever — leaving millions searching for something they can believe in — Epstein explains how humanism offers comfort and hope that affirms our ability to pursue ethical lives of personal fulfillment in which we can aspire together for the greater good of all.

A student of Sherwin Wine, the late rabbi and founder of Humanistic Judaism, Epstein’s humanism is rooted in his mentor’s essentially Jewish formulations. His most impassioned argument is with megachurch pastor Rick Warren and other evangelicals who believe secularism is the enemy and a moral society impossible without a belief in God.

*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, July 8,  
6:30-8:00 p.m.**

**at the Muhlenberg Library  
NONSENSE ON STILTS:  
*How to Tell Science from Bunk*  
by Massimo Pigliucci**

Why do people believe bunk? What causes them to deny evolution and climate change, to believe in astrology or that vaccinations cause autism? Why do they embrace such pseudoscientific beliefs and practices?

Noted skeptic, research scientist and philosopher (and SHSNY Honorary Member) Massimo Pigliucci separates fact from fantasy in this entertaining exploration of the nature of science and the borderlands of fringe science. Pigliucci cuts through the ambiguity to look more closely at how science is conducted, how it is disseminated, how it is interpreted, and what it means to our society.

“A refreshingly original excursion over the unmarked territory separating science from pseudo-science and non-science.”

**August**

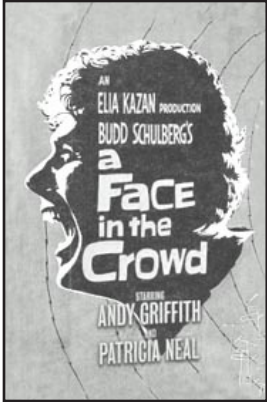
**Date & Place TBA  
THEORY AND REALITY:  
*An Introduction to the  
Philosophy of Science*  
by Peter Godfrey-Smith**

“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, as evidenced by the charmingly opinionated style of presentation and the ease with which he ties latter-day perspectives on science back to the classic positivist tradition and the history of science. . . . A very fresh and well-conceived book.”



# SHSNY CALENDAR: JUNE 2010

**MONDAY, JUNE 7, 7:00 p.m.**  
**SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**A FACE IN THE CROWD**



Director Elia Kazan's 1957 masterpiece – from a script by Budd Schulberg – about a homespun hobo, Larry “Lonesome” Rhodes (Andy

Griffith), discovered by talent scout Marcia Jeffries (Patricia Neal), who makes him a superstar. Then “Lonesome” gets a taste of high life and the power of celebrity, losing himself in the glare of klieg lights as the film plays out Lord Acton’s famous dictum about the corruption of power.

Also with Walter Matthau, Lee Remick, Anthony Franciosa, and look for a very young Rip Torn.

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)

### **Coming Attractions**

**July 19:** “Religulous,” Bill Maher’s funny take on the three big religions.

**August/September:** What do you want to see? Come and tell us.

**STUFF HAPPENS!  
SCHEDULES CHANGE!  
CHECK FOR UPDATES  
BY PHONING  
212-308-2165**

**SUNDAY, JUNE 27**  
**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.

*July brunch: 7/18*

### **FRIDAY, JUNE 4, 7:00 p.m.** **CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS** **at the**

**NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
The atheist iconoclast author of *god is not Great* will be in “Live from the NYPL” conversation with Paul Holdengraber to promote his newest book, *Hitch 22: Some Confessions and Contradictions, a Memoir*.

At the Celeste Bartos Forum of the NYPL at 42nd & Fifth. Tickets \$15-25, from Showlix at 1-888-718-4253 or [showclix.com](http://showclix.com).

### **SATURDAY, JUNE 5, 11 a.m.** **FREETHINKERS TOUR** **OF NYC 2010**

Led by a professional guide, start at 21 St. & Lexington, where Robert Ingersoll, “the Great Agnostic,” lived. As you amble, Susan Jacoby, author of *Freethinkers*, and *The Age of American Unreason*, will give readings at various points, including Union Square, Cooper Union and the West Village at Grove St. (where Tom Paine died). Cost: \$20.

To RSVP, email Michael DeDora at: [mdedora@centerforinquiry.net](mailto:mdedora@centerforinquiry.net)

### **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/>

## ETHICS FOR EXTRATERRESTRIALS

Robert Wright

(Reprinted from *Opinionator on The New York Times Online*, 5/4/2010, and forwarded by Edith Amster)

Remember the episode of “The Twilight Zone” where the earthlings discover only too late that a book brandished by extraterrestrial visitors, titled “To Serve Man,” is not, in fact, a philanthropic manifesto – but, sadly, a cookbook?

Even after watching this show as a kid, I didn’t give serious thought to the possibility of space aliens turning us into toast. But then last week Stephen Hawking made news by weighing in on the subject: “If aliens ever visit us, I think the outcome would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn’t turn out very well for the Native Americans.” And Hawking knows a thing or two about outer space!

Assessing Hawking’s conjecture may seem hopeless. Doesn’t discerning the motivations of aliens who show no sign of existing amount to the most untethered thought experiment ever?

Not necessarily. Rather than build a whole thought experiment *de novo*, we can just look around – because, in a sense, we are the thought experiment. We’re an example of an intelligent species (as species go, I mean) that is a century or two away from the technological capacity to voyage beyond its solar system and, upon finding civilizations that are less advanced, having its way with them. Which way would that way be?

It turns out there’s reason to hope that, actually, we’d be kinder to a new world than Europeans were to the New World.

At the outset I should concede that there are differences between us and any given race of space aliens. We alone (to take just one example) have used advanced technology to make a TV show called “Jersey Shore.”

Though our moral “progress” to date has been driven largely by self-interest, the role of enlightenment will have to grow if we are to venture beyond our solar system. Still, we—like, presumably, any intelligent species anywhere—were created by natural selection, for better and worse. And, like any scientifically advanced species, we’re finding that the laws of the universe grant the technological potential for both mass affiliation and mass murder. So the question is which aspect of this technology our naturally selected nature would incline us to emphasize a century or two from now, should we stumble upon an inhabited planet.

On Hawking’s side of the argument is the fact that natural selection does create organisms prone to belligerent self-interest. And when individuals manage to submerge their self-interest in the interest of a group – clan, tribe, nation – the belligerence tends to just move to the group level, as it did when European explorers,

while behaving very politely toward one another, slaughtered natives. As the biologist Richard Alexander has put it, the flip side of “within-group amity” tends to be “between-group enmity.”

So why wouldn’t an alien species evince this principle, and unite only to conquer? One possible answer can be found in the philosopher Peter Singer’s 1981 book, *The Expanding Circle*.

Singer notes the moral progress we’ve seen since the days when citizens of Greek city-states treated citizens of other Greek city-states as subhuman. Compare this to the now-common belief that people of all races, creeds and colors are actually people, worthy of decent treatment.

Encouragingly, Singer sees this progress as pretty natural. It begins with intuitions planted in us by natural selection and then is nurtured by reflection, reason and discourse. Eventually a kind of intellectual momentum kicks in, carrying us toward enlightenment. And we’re not done yet! Singer thinks our circle of moral concern could grow beyond our species to encompass all sentient beings (notably nonhuman ones on Earth; Singer is a seminal animal rights advocate).

At that point, presumably, planets everywhere would be safe from the ravages of earthlings.

A slightly less hopeful argument has been made by – well, by me. In my book, *Nonzero*, I argue that the moral progress Singer rightly celebrates has been driven less by pure reason than by pragmatic self-interest. Technology has drawn groups of people into more and more far-flung “non-zero-sum” relations – relations of interdependence; increasingly it has been in the interest of one group to acknowledge the humanity of another group, if only so the groups can play win-win games. The decline of American prejudice toward Japanese after World War II was driven less by purely rational enlightenment than by the Japanese transition from mortal enemies to trade partners and Cold War allies.

If I’m right, and we grant the moral significance of other beings to the extent that it’s in our interest to do so, then why wouldn’t we, in 100 or 200 years, do what Hawking imagines aliens doing – happen upon a planet, extract its resources through whatever brutality is most efficient and move on to the next target? Absent cause to be nice, why would we be nice?

Well, you could make a case that, though our moral “progress” to date has been driven largely by self-interest, with only a smidgen of true enlightenment, the role of enlightenment will have to grow if we are to venture beyond our solar system a century from now.

After all, to do that venturing, we first have to survive the intervening 100 years in good shape. And that job is complicated by various technologies, notably weapons that could blow up the world.

More to the point: these weapons are now embedded



in a particularly dicey context: a world where shadowy “nonstate actors” are the looming threat, a world featuring a “war on terror” that, if mishandled, could pull us into a chaos that ultimately engulfs the whole planet. And maybe “winning” that war — averting global chaos — would entail authentic and considerable moral progress.

That, at least, is a claim I make in my most recent book, *The Evolution of God*. I argue that if we don’t radically develop our “moral imagination” — get much better at putting ourselves in the shoes of people very different from ourselves, even the shoes of our enemies — then the planet could be in big trouble.

It’s not crazy to think that this sort of challenge would eventually face an intelligent species on any planet. Certainly the challenge’s technological underpinning — that the capacity to escape your solar system arrives well after the capacity to destroy your planet — could reflect the order in which the laws of physics reveal themselves to any inquisitive species, not a peculiar intellectual path taken by our species.

So maybe any visiting aliens would themselves have passed this test; they’d have mustered the moral progress necessary to avoid ruining their planet, and this progress would involve enough genuine enlightenment — enough respect for sentient life — that we’d be safe in their hands. This is less than wholly reassuring. After all, the suggestion here is that before any species can shift into high technological gear, it has to undergo a moral test so stringent that most species would fail it. In which case the chances are we’ll fail it — and our best hope may be to hold on long enough for kindly space aliens to ride in and save the day.

Things would be a lot simpler if it turned out that Peter Singer is right. And for all I know he is.

(Ed: Received as *PIQUE* was being prepared for printing.)

### PAUL KURTZ RESIGNS

Amherst, New York, May 18, 2010

*Open Letter to friends and colleagues in the Center for Inquiry/Transnational movement:*

This letter officially announces my resignation from the boards of the Center for Inquiry, Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, and the Council for Secular Humanism, all organizations that I founded beginning in 1976. It is with profound regret that I also wish to announce my resignation as editor-in-chief of *Free Inquiry* magazine, now in its 30th year of publication, and from the editorial board of *The Skeptical Inquirer*.

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. — Paul Kurtz

## JESUS ON EGGS

Leland Gregory

(Excerpted from “An Eggstraordinary Story,” in *Stupid History: Tales of Stupidity, Strangeness, and Misconceptions Throughout the Ages*, forwarded by Anton Spivak.)

Images of the Virgin Mary on a grilled cheese sandwich, Jesus on a refrigerator door, Mother Teresa on a cinnamon bun — these all seem like laughable bits of weird news. But what if Christ prophesied his return on freshly laid eggs? That’s just what happened in a small village near Leeds, England, in 1806, when a hen laid an egg with the words “Christ is Coming” inscribed in black on its shell. Mary Bateman, the hen’s owner, announced that God had arrived in a vision to tell her the hen would lay fourteen prophetic eggs; the fourteenth would usher in the apocalyptic destruction of the world.

But the news wasn’t all hard-boiled — God had also bestowed upon Bateman special slips of paper with the inscription by J.C. that were basically “Get Into Heaven Free” passes available for one shilling apiece. More than 1,000 people purchased the slips of paper and rested comfortably in the knowledge that they were guaranteed salvation while everyone else was going to burn in hell. A doctor who was skeptical of the eggs, or not in on the yolk, examined the eggs and discovered that God had used corrosive ink to write on the shells. He told the local authorities, and they burst into the tavern where the chicken was caged and caught Mary Bateman red-handed — shoving the fourteenth inscribed egg into the hen to “lay” later that day.

Bateman was hanged, not for egging people into believing her story, but because she later became an abortionist, which was illegal in the nineteenth century.

And this just in from our Brooklyn bureau ...

## OUR LADY OF THE BEDROOM FLOOR

Reported by Chuck McMellon

Once again Brooklyn is in the religious news, this time with a holy apparition that suddenly appeared on the bedroom floor of Mrs. Aislin McGillicuddy’s five-room flat at 328 Chauncey Street. “Begosh and begorrah,” Mrs. McGillicuddy was heard saying as a line of neighbors formed outside her door, each paying the \$5 admission charge to view the Madonna.



Who could doubt it?

## DECOMPOSING HUMANISM: WHY REPLACE RELIGION?

Austin Dacey

(Reprinted from [www.religiondispatches.org](http://www.religiondispatches.org), 10/29/2009)

Meet the latest critics of the new atheists: the old humanists. It is not enough, they say, to take a stand against religion—we must stand up something in its place. Humanists are right to think that there is more to life than atheism, but wrong to think that they are the ones to provide it. It is not the job of religion's critics to organize a replacement.

Just to show you how serious I am, I've christened a new fallacy to give a name to this mistake in thinking: I call it the *fallacy of decomposition*. The fallacy of decomposition is the mistake of supposing that as the estate of religion collapses, there must be a single new institution that arises to serve the same social functions it served—that the social space vacated by religion must be filled by a religion-shaped object. Instead, it could be that in the lot once occupied by faith there springs up a variegated garden, a patchwork of independent institutions, each of which fulfills one of those functions. Out of one, many.

Thus, for our education, we attend the university; for cosmological clarity, we visit the planetarium; for therapy, the therapist; for beauty, the museum, the concert hall. Good stories? We read the Good Book, sure, but also the good books.

After all, it was something like this phenomenon that characterized the secularization of Western Europe. The dramatic drop in regular church attendance in Europe was not accompanied by a dramatic spike in the membership of organized atheism or humanism, which remains marginal. For post-religious Europeans, the point was to not show up anywhere once a week to seek absolution, but to stay out late on Saturday nights and sleep in late on Sunday mornings.

When you think about it, organized humanism is a hard sell. Do you like paying dues and making forced pleasantries over post-service coffee cake, but can't stand beautiful architecture and professionally trained musicians? If so, organized humanism may be for you. Greg Epstein (the "humanist chaplain" at Harvard and the author of *Good Without God*) is a lovely person, but I've heard him sing, and I think I'll stick to Bach, Arvo Pärt, and Kirk Franklin for my spiritual uplift. Do we really need an institution for people who find Reform Judaism and Unitarian Universalism too rigid? Yes. It's called the weekend.

Let me be clear. I am not criticizing humanists for getting together to fight for the ideals of a secular, open society. For the better part of a decade, I proudly worked for an organization (the Center for Inquiry, publisher of *Free Inquiry* magazine) that does just that. But even there, I encountered tension between those of us who saw the

Center primarily as a think tank and advocate addressing the general public in the marketplace of ideas, and those who saw it primarily as a congregation whose purpose is to gather up all the self-identifying refugees of traditional religion and offer them a secular alternative to everything it did for them. Compare: you might support *Médecins Sans Frontières* because you believe in their work, but you wouldn't expect them to officiate your wedding. I always maintained that the point should be to make the mainstream culture more secular and humanistic, not to create a new secular humanist subculture.

Neither am I arguing against disorganized secular humanism, of which I am both perpetual student and ardent lover. For disorganized secular humanism is practically identical to the ethos of modern, liberal democracy. Here lies the real embarrassment of the fallacy of decomposition. When humanism is equated with "organized" humanism, an entire civilization is reduced to a fringe group of dyspeptic rationalists who gather once a year in hotel ballrooms (as Sam Harris observed a few years ago before a group of dyspeptic rationalists gathered in a hotel ballroom). According to this impoverished self-concept, humanist "literature" does not embrace the better part of all letters but instead only the relatively few writers like Kurt Vonnegut or Isaac Asimov who have turned up at conferences of the American Humanist Association to accept awards.

Apparently, in thinking about what might come after religion, it is hard for humanists to see beyond a kind of telecom model, in which a conglomerate bundles together all of these services, so that the same people who put us in touch with metaphysical truth also provide us with community and morality.

It is all the more ironic that this model itself is an invention of religion, a sort of meta-dogma. It is a vestige of the contingent historical fact that after giving up its dreams of theocratic control, Western Christianity contented itself with claiming for its territory everything that fell outside of the civil sphere of government and politics and the commercial sphere of market activity. Why else would learning, art, food, sex, and the meaning of life all be handled by the same religious monopoly?

The promise and the peril of the open, liberal democratic society lies precisely in the possibility of a civility and a solidarity untethered from any unitary philosophy or community—it doesn't all have to hang together. The secular house has many mansions.

### THE AFTERLIFE IS CANCELLED

Our call (PIQUE, May, 2010) for your short essays, flights of fancy on what an afterlife would be like—if there were such a thing—being met with a white-hot wave of indifference, the contest is called off, and I'll keep my copy of *Sum*, by David Eagleman. — JR

## RAPING JESUS

Garry Wills

*(Excerpted from "Forgive Not: A Catholic's struggle with the sins of his church," in The New Republic, 5/27/10. Mr. Wills is one of America's foremost lay Catholics.)*

Even now, as Church leaders belatedly try to repent and repair things, the mythical underpinnings of the priestly system continue to be taught — that only celibates can be priests (the apostles were married, all but Paul), that refusal to marry gives a man a superior caringness, that it makes him unworldly and concerned with other souls. What real change can occur when such myths are clung to with a blind ferocity? The resistance to change can be seen in the fact that the papacy has not faced the facts of a priesthood dwindling in both numbers and quality, of a financial base eroding as Church attendance goes down and donations dry up, even as damages in the billions must be paid to victims of "holy" predators. The wonderful teaching and nursing services of the nuns have evaporated.

The reaction of the hierarchy has been to dig itself even deeper into the past — to blame the Church's troubles on such old evils as secularism, relativism, positivism, pluralism, and a "permissive" culture. The Second Vatican Council is blamed as well, and the Popes have tried to blunt or reverse its changes. Pope Benedict wants to go back to the Latin mass, with the priest turned from the people. He has cut back ecumenical initiatives, denying again the validity of Anglican orders, forbidding concelebrations of Mass with Protestants, declaring (in *Dominus Iesus*) that all other churches are "gravely deficient." He wants to put nuns back in their habits. He is driving to canonize the anti-Semitic Popes Pius IX and Pius XII. These are further signs of the structures of deceit — of self-deception as the first step to defying "worldly wisdom."

I am asked, if I believe this, why I remain a Catholic. I do that precisely because I do not equate the people of God with the papacy. ... I want to be at one with Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and others; but I want all of these communions to come together, and I cannot do that by renouncing the Catholic membership in such an ecumenical Christianity, saying some churches are better than others. ... All of us who honor [Jesus'] name must come together. When a Catholic tells me — often these days, it is a young woman — that she can no longer put up with the male monarchical Church, I tell her, "Stay with us, we need you. The people of God need you."

All those who honor the name of Jesus are engaged in a joint search for the Jesus who will not be found in marble halls or wearing imperial costumes. He is forever on the run. He is the one who said, "Whatever you did to any of my brothers, even the lowliest [*elackistoi*], you did

to me" (Matthew 25:41). That means that the priests abusing the vulnerable young were doing that to Jesus, raping Jesus. Any clerical functionary who shows more sympathy for the predator priests than for their victims instantly disqualifies himself as a follower of Jesus. The cardinals said they must care for their own, going to jail if necessary to protect a priest. We say the same thing, but the "our own" we care for are the victimized, the poor, the violated. They are Jesus.

## CANCEL THE MOTHER TERESA POSTAGE STAMP

Dennis Middlebrooks

*(Mr. Middlebrooks is a member of SHSNY and of FANNY — Freethinking Activist Non-Believing New Yorkers.)*

The U.S. Postal Service plans to issue a stamp in honor of Mother Teresa, despite the fact that this violates that organization's own guidelines against stamps honoring religious figures. Apart from that, this woman was opposed to reproductive freedom for women everywhere; denigrated other religions; took fraud money from Charles Keating and refused to return it; took in billions in contributions but turned over much, if not most of the money to the Vatican rather than spending it on Calcutta's poor; denied suffering patients in her wretched "clinic" anesthesia ("offer your suffering up to Jesus"), and was a friend of "Baby Doc" Duvalier, the thuggish dictator of Haiti. This vile woman deserves a place in infamy, not her face on U.S. stamps.

I have visited the web site of the U.S. Postal Service and filed a protest via e-mail. It is not hard to do once you click the link for Customer Service and follow the instructions. I urge all freethinkers to take the time to protest this outrageous decision. Write to:

Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee  
c/o Stamp Development, U.S. Postal Service  
1735 North Lynn St., Suite 5013  
Arlington VA 22209-6432.

Or E-mail: <http://faq.usps.com/eCustomer/iq/usps/request.do?create=kb:USPSFAQ&forward=inquiryType>

## YOU RAN OVER WHO?

*(From the Associated Press, 5/7/2010)*

A young woman named Brittany Cantarella, while driving in Northampton, MA, on May 4, failed to yield to a pedestrian in a crosswalk and ran him down, causing him minor facial injuries which required hospital treatment.

She has received a citation, but there is no word yet on whether Lord Jesus Christ has forgiven her.

No, not the guy up on the crucifix in church — the one prone in the crosswalk, whose name is Lord Jesus Christ.

Really. Legally.



**BARBARA LIFTON TAKES ON PAUL KURTZ  
AND "NEO-HUMANISM"**

*To the Editor:*

Re: "New From Paul Kurtz: 'Neo-Humanism'" (PIQUE, May), if it weren't for the "New Atheists" like Victor Stenger, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris, we would still be crying vainly in the wilderness, trying to convince people that doing justice and good are what makes the world a better place. These brilliant thinkers have irrefutably shown people that more is accomplished to relieve suffering in the universe by not wasting time crying out to a genie out of a bottle with a long white beard called "God," sitting somewhere up there between Jupiter and the Andromeda galaxy.

It helps to know that scientists like Stenger can factually prove that there is no supernatural being up there, telling us how to do good (as if we didn't know how) or be spanked.

Please, Professor Kurtz, calm down. The SHSNY and its friends have been talking about how human beings can help to make the world a better place for humans, animals and plants, long before you created your "new" humanist manifesto. We don't need it.

Peace to all. – *Barbara Lifton*

P.S.: Just noticed that the Huffington Post said, about Kurtz, "... it is not enough to reject God ... ." *Please!* Secularists and atheists don't reject "god" – we know there is no such thing, no "god" to "reject."

**(PRO)-LIFE IMITATES (SATIRICAL) ART  
John Rafferty**

In the April Fool section of April PIQUE, we made fun of pro-lifers by conjuring up a fake "One Foot" abortion law supposedly enacted by the South Dakota legislature. That fictional edict required a woman seeking an abortion in that state – and her doctor – to first stand on one foot for 45 minutes while watching a gory video of a late-term abortion and listening to Paul Anka's saccharine "She's Having My Baby" over and over.

It was a joke.

On April 28 *The New York Times* reported that the Oklahoma legislature overrode Governor Brad Henry's vetoes to approve two anti-abortion measures:

*... one of which requires women to undergo an ultrasound and listen to a description of the fetus before getting an abortion ... mandating that a doctor or technician set up the monitor so the woman can see it and describe the heart, limbs and organs of the fetus. No exceptions are made for rape and incest victims.*

*A second measure passed into law on Tuesday prevents women who have had a disabled baby from suing a doctor for withholding information about birth defects while the child was in the womb.*

*Opponents argue that the law will protect doctors who purposely mislead a woman to keep her from choosing an abortion.*

No joke.

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