

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

---

October, 2010

It's Freethought Month (details on our October 10 celebration brunch, page 7), so think freely – and often – all month long. Herein, we visit secular (or will it be Islamist?) Turkey, re-visit hate crime law and honor a departed long-time member. We try to understand reality, self-deluding stupids and the eerie mind of Pat Robertson. We catch up on the phony news of the galaxy but, first, we offer several opinions on (and of) the latest ginned-up “controversy” right here in town – JR

---

## ABOUT THE “GROUND ZERO MOSQUE”

John Rafferty

There are two problems with that title. First, it's not a mosque. It's the Park51 project, to become the Cordoba House cultural center, built for and by Muslims, but open to the whole community. There is to be a large room for “prayer and meditation,” but if the proposed building were a mosque there would be no theater, swimming pool or basketball court on the premises – just as there are none in any church or synagogue I'm aware of. Cordoba House's purpose is to be the Muslim counterpart of Jewish (and all) New York's 92nd Street Y.

No matter, the screamers in the streets and their cynical enablers in the right-wing media will continue to call it a “mosque.” And will continue to ignore the facts that: (1) there was a Muslim prayer room on the 17th floor of the World Trade Center south tower; (2) that Muslim staff members of the Windows on the World restaurant used a stairwell between the 106th and 107th floors of the north tower for their daily prayers; and that (3) at least 60 American Muslims working in those towers were among the murdered on 9/11. American Muslims worked, prayed and died on that “sacred ground” along with their fellow Americans.

What's more, the man in charge, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, is exactly the person who could legitimately raise his hand and say, “Here I am,” when the rest of us demand, “Where are the moderate Muslims to condemn the terrorists?” He has served both the Bush and Obama administrations as an ambassador of American values throughout the Muslim world. Al Qaeda would gleefully

decapitate him, but in his own country – *this one* – this enemy of al Qaeda and all it stands for is being treated as *our* enemy by the cultural and political right in order to score cheap political points.

The second problem with “Ground Zero Mosque” (and New York Society for Ethical Culture Leader Anne Klaeyen made these two points beautifully in a Sunday platform address in August) is that it's *not* “Ground Zero,” it's the World Trade Center. Look at the subway maps and PATH station signage, the building designations and the street signs: “World Trade Center.”

But “Ground Zero” has real *zing* to it, doesn't it? Forget that it doesn't make sense, that the phrase has always been used to indicate a starting point from which to measure outward, and there is no “outward” in this case. But “Ground Zero” and “sacred ground” are so much sexier than “World Trade Center\*,” aren't they?

And that's what the noisemakers and hatemongers on the religious and political extreme right want to promote – the concept of the “sacred” in “our” fight against a “foreign” religion and, while they're at it, score a few points off that undercover Muslim in the White House in an election season. [See “Intolerance,” page 2.]

In 2004 Karl Rove and Ken Mehlman sounded the tocsin – “Gay marriage is coming! Your child could be next!” – to drive the Religious Right to the polls; this year it's the phony “illegal aliens” threat (the numbers are down by *two-thirds* this decade – *what* threat?) and this, the “Muslim insult to our sacred dead.” It's working, they're winning – we're losing.

They're winning because, as usual, they control the language in a steady drumbeat of half-truths and

---

**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.

**SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / 212-308-2165 / [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org)**

Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only \$30.

Articles published in PIQUE are archived in <http://www.shsny.org>. They may be reprinted, in full or in part, in other newsletters. The URL (<http://www.shsny.org>) should be referenced.

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

lies: "Ground Zero," "mosque," "monument to Muslim victory," "ties to terrorism." Never mind that the local community board approved Cordoba House in open session and the city landmarks commission praised it, as have the district's congressman, the Manhattan Borough President and the Mayor of New York. Never mind, because Rush Limbaugh of Florida and Sarah Palin of Alaska offer the sweet reason of "compromise" (i.e., "Build it somewhere else, second-class citizens."), and Newt Gingrich of Georgia wants us to be just like the Saudis and allow Muslims to build here when the Wahhabis allow a church to be built in Arabia. Have any of those three ever *heard* of the First Amendment?

I hold no brief for *any* religion, and regular readers of PIQUE know that I have railed against fundamentalist Islam, including the threat it poses here at home to basic American freedoms, again and again in these pages. But this isn't about Muslim intolerance – it's about *ours*.

On September 6 the *Times* ran a front-page article about American Muslims in this hate-filled season wondering if they will ever be accepted in America.

Let me assure you, Abdullah and Soraya, you will. Cordoba House's problems will go on for months, perhaps years. I expect hard hats to brawl at the construction site and loutish teenagers to make the finished building a target for vandalism on drunken weekends, but those vicissitudes will pass. They'll pass because the American people are basically decent and tolerant, and will come around. We are a composite of our polyglot and multi-ethnic heritage; we're not bred and fed on blood feuds and myths of "sacred ground." We heal, we get over our grudges, and we move on.

I'm old enough to remember World War II clearly, and the suspicion and mistrust of Muslims that some, even many, Americans feel today is nothing compared to the nearly universal racist hatred we all felt then for the Japanese and even Japanese-Americans, whom we didn't count as "real" Americans and whom we shut up in internment – or should I say "concentration" – camps. Ten years after the war we were buying their cameras, then their cars, copiers and computers, and even envying their accomplishments and lifestyle. Sushi, anyone?

In the mid-nineteenth century Irish fleeing the famine were deemed such a threat to bring Papist rule and the end of democracy to America that they were the prime reason for the growth of the nativist Know Nothing party and the nationwide spread of the Ku Klux Klan. At the turn of the 20th century Italian immigrants were all viewed as bomb-throwing anarchists (more than Sacco and Vanzetti were executed for crimes they didn't commit) and then as members or supporters of "Black Hand" (i.e., the mafia). And about the same pre-World War I time, the hundreds of thousands of Jews who arrived here were considered, well, you know, Jews.

But before the century was out all America celebrated names like Kennedy, Reagan, Cagney, Breslin, Buckley and Clooney. Like Scalia, Sinatra, DiMaggio, De Niro, Napolitano and Giamatti. And Brandeis, Gershwin, Salk, Seinfeld, Sagan and Bloomberg. Hell, we even elected a black man (well, half black) President.

So man up, Muslims, your day will come. We'll have changed you in the process, and you will have changed us – both for the better, I'll bet. Meanwhile, build, and invite me to, Cordoba House.

*\* I can't resist a couple of points about the original WTC towers. First, they were ugly. I have shocked out-of-towners by informing them that most New Yorkers with any design sense considered those standing-on-end cigarette cartons a blight on the city skyline, architectural brutality at its worst. Also, while I wish the new developers and tenants well, has everyone forgotten that office space in the original towers went begging (too costly, too far from other city centers) until Governor Rockefeller ordered state agencies to rent millions of square feet? I wonder how many firms will sign up for space in the new buildings ("Freedom" Tower? – George Babbitt lives!), and how many of their employees will demur for fear – irrational, but real – of spending every day at the center of what they worry will be the next bull's-eye? – JR*

## INTOLERANCE

Lawrence Wright

(Excerpted from *The New Yorker*, September 20)

Last year, when plans were announced for Cordoba House, an Islamic community center to be built two blocks north of Ground Zero, few opposed them. The project was designed to promote moderate Islam and provide a bridge to other faiths. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, the Sufi cleric leading the effort, told the *Times*, in December, "We want to push back against the extremists." In August, the Landmarks Preservation Commission granted Park51, as the center is now known, unanimous approval. A month later, it is the focus of a bitter quarrel about the place of Islam in our society. ...

In the dispute over Park51, the role of the radical imams [*who manufactured the cartoons-of-Mohammed controversy in 2005*] has been taken by bloggers and right-wing commentators. ... Pamela Geller, who writes a blog called Atlas Shrugs and runs a group called Stop Islamization of America ... has already contributed to the phony claim that President Obama is a Muslim (which twenty percent of the American public now believe is true), by promoting a theory that he is the bastard son of Malcolm X. Because of Park51's location, Geller compares the community center (or the "9/11 Monster Mosque," as she terms it) to Al Aqsa, the ancient mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem – a flash point for Jewish extremists in Israel.

Geller framed the argument for the *New York Post*,

which added the false information that Park51 was going to open on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Deliberate misrepresentations of Imam Abdul Rauf as a supporter of terror further distorted the story, as it moved on to the Fox News commentariat and from there to political figures, such as Newt Gingrich, who compared Abdul Rauf and his supporters to Nazis desecrating the Holocaust Memorial Museum by their presence. These strident falsehoods have undoubtedly influenced the two-thirds of Americans who now oppose Park51. The cynicism of this rhetorical journey can be traced in the remarks of Laura Ingraham, who interviewed Daisy Khan, Abdul Rauf's wife and partner in the project, in December. "I can't find many people who really have a problem with it," Ingraham told Khan then. "I like what you're trying to do." Ingraham has since been brought into line. "I say the terrorists have won with the way this has gone down," she said last month, on "Good Morning America." "Six hundred feet from where thousands of our fellow-Americans were incinerated in the name of political Islam, and we're supposed to be considered intolerant if we're not cheering this?"

Culture wars are currently being waged against Muslim Americans across the country. In Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where Muslims have been worshiping for thirty years, a construction vehicle was burned at the site of a new Islamic center. Pat Robertson, the fundamentalist Christian leader, warned his followers on the "700 Club" that, if the center brings "thousands and thousands" of Muslims into the area, "the next thing you know, they're going to be taking over the city council. They're going to have an ordinance that calls for public prayer five times a day." As in the Park51 controversy, fearmongering and slander serve as the basis of an argument that cannot rely on facts to make its case.

The most worrisome development in the evolution of al Qaeda's influence since 9/11 is the growth of pockets of Islamist radicalism in Western populations. Until recently, America had been largely immune to the extremism that has placed some European nations in peril. America's Muslim community is more ethnically diverse than that of any other major religion in the country. Its members hold more college and graduate degrees than the national average. They also have a higher employment rate and more jobs in the professional sector. (Compare that with England and France, where education and employment rates among Muslims fall below the national averages.) These factors have allowed American Muslims and non-Muslims to live together with a degree of harmony that any other Western nation would envy.

The best ally in the struggle against violent Islamism is moderate Islam. The unfounded attacks on the backers of Park51 and others, along with such sideshows as a pastor calling for the burning of Korans, give substance

to the Al Qaeda argument that the U.S. is waging a war against Islam, rather than against the terrorists' misshapen effigy of that religion. Those stirring the pot in this debate are casting a spell that is far more dangerous than they may imagine.

*For opposing opinions ...*

## **BEWARE OF ELEPHANTS AND CAMELS**

**Art Harris**

**T**he controversy over whether to build a mosque near Ground Zero has little to do with "desecrating holy ground" and more to do with the elephant in the room that everybody tiptoes around.

Clearly, Muslims have every right to build where they want. They could build on the GZ site if it were possible and certainly near it. In upholding the law, I am forced to agree with them. What they appear to lack is the sensitivity, felt by some, to the proximity of such a monument.

But is it lack of sensitivity? I don't believe so. In confronting the elephant, I believe that what most of the protesters object to is based on, first, what we've seen of Muslim immigration in Western Europe and, second, our fear that what went wrong there could spread here.

Many in the West are aware of the negative influence that Muslim immigration has had in Denmark, Holland, the UK and France. The murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh by a Muslim in Holland, the threats to employees of the Danish newspaper that printed the Mohammed cartoons, and many other incidents have produced a cloud of fear that hangs over all Europeans. In the UK, imams predict that by 2100 the Union Jack will be replaced by the Green Crescent flag.

Right here in America, the cable cartoon show "South Park" continues to poke fun at Christians and Jews, but apparently in fear of Muslim action withdrew an episode some Muslims objected to.

All Muslims are not jihadists. Most, I'm sure, immigrated here for the same reason that our forebears did, seeking freedom to earn a living and worship freely. But, as numerous writers—Muslims and others—have pointed out, too many brought with them objectionable ideas and actions that they should have left behind.

Before Muslims began arriving here in numbers, had we ever had "honor killings" of women—wives and daughters—on American soil? We have now.

Keeping in mind the Arab fable of the camel inserting its nose under the tent, many Americans fear Muslim immigration and influence. They see a fanatical group whose beliefs caused the destruction of the Twin Towers. They count the bodies of American soldiers returned from a war that they believed was to end a threat to us and establish a democratic Muslim nation. They see wild and unrestrained people who kill and maim innocents who are only going about their daily lives. And they fear that unwelcome camel arriving on these shores.

## MOVE THE MOSQUE TO THE U.N.

Al Henick

The majority of liberal individuals and groups such as President Obama, Mayor Bloomberg, and the Center For Inquiry (in their latest explanation of policy) defend the right of the Muslims to construct a mosque at Ground Zero. Everyone involved in the discussion, including the most conservative right-wingers, agree with their right according to our constitution and the freedom of religion which America is known for. The debate, however, concerns only whether the location is proper or in bad taste. This is where the politically-wise President and Mayor step out of the picture and voice no opinion. Their contribution, therefore, is useless.

No one equates all Muslims with terrorists. We all recognize the proliferation of "moderate" Muslims. Yet, were the thousands of Muslims who danced in the streets in the mid-east after 9/11 all terrorists? Where were the massive demonstrations by the moderates against the extremist murderers in their midst, such as is occurring now in favor of the mosque? Where were the massive demonstrations by the moderates when Salman Rushdie was sentenced to death by the Iranian government for opinions expressed in a novel, and Muslims throughout the world were urged to kill him and his publishers? Deafening silence! Is it barely possible that many of the non-extremist Muslims secretly consider 9/11 a sort of Islamic victory?

Freedom of religion, as all other freedoms, has limitations. We have all heard the cliché about shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater under the guise of freedom of speech. Using whatever legal means or political pressure available to change the location of the mosque does not deny freedom of religion. A vast number of family members of the victims in the Trade Center can be understood to consider this construction a form of pouring salt on a wound. If for no other reason than to respect the feelings of these surviving families, the structure should be built elsewhere. If they truly want an institution which will help to bring cooperation and harmony between religions, a location near the U.N. would be ideal.

Is the construction of a mosque near Ground Zero no different than if it were a church, temple, or synagogue? Although we could gladly do without any of those structures there, to equate them is absurd. Christians (since the Crusades) have no elements within their ranks that promote execution of their rivals, nor do Jews, Mormons, Buddhists, or any of the other major religions, to my knowledge.

The good Muslims should be protesting vehemently against murder and suicide within their own ranks, and then maybe "Islamophobia" would no longer exist.

## JESUS AND MO ON INTERFAITH HARMONY

(Reprinted from [jesusandmo.net/2010/06/02/dalai/](http://jesusandmo.net/2010/06/02/dalai/))

*Jesus:* The Dalai Lama is right, if our species is to survive, we must embrace the oneness of humanity. Harmony among the major faiths is an essential ingredient of peaceful coexistence. Fortunately, there is a strong unifying thread among all the major religions – a thread that binds us together, and gives us hope for the future.

*Mohammed:* We all hate atheists.

*Jesus:* That, obviously – plus compassion.

*Mo:* Oh, yeah, compassion.

## THE "NEWS OF THE GALAXY" IS JUST AS PUERILE AS IT IS HERE

Tom Tomorrow

(Transcribed from "Scientists Want to Know ..." in the "This Modern World" cartoon, 9/14/10)

*Two extra-terrestrial newscasters, their eyes and mouths atop polka-dotted stalks, address their television audience.*

*Green alien newscaster with yellow polka dots:* Salutations, and welcome to Glox News. Our top story this nanosecond: sentients across the Northern Land Mass want to know – *which* set of invisible, omniscient beings whose existence can never be proven does our current Supreme Leader *truly* believe in.

*Blue alien newscaster with red polka dots:* Does he really worship the one *true* grouping of deities like most of the residents of the Land Mass he leads ...

*Green newscaster:* ... or is he secretly an adherent of clearly *false* deities favored by the Anxiety Inducers?

*Blue newscaster:* Joining us to comment on the controversy is a prominent member of the Opposition Party.

*Orange alien (on bubble screen):* Obviously we cannot know what the Supreme Leader believes deep in his primary blood-pumping organ. But if he claims to share the dominant unprovable belief of our Land Mass, then I suppose we have no choice but to accept his assertion as "not yet discredited."

*Green newscaster:* Thank you for your valuable insight.

*Blue newscaster:* Supporters of the Party Currently In Power wonder if the controversy has anything to do with the Supreme Leader's color scheme, a charge his detractors *vehemently* deny.

*Pale Blue alien with white blotches (on bubble screen):* We are absolutely not color schemists. Some of my best friends are purple with green splotches.

*Blue newscaster:* Coming up next, we examine the worst-case scenario: What if the Leader of our Land Mass does not believe in *any* invisible, omniscient beings whatsoever?

*Green newscaster:* The possibility is too horrific to contemplate.

*Blue newscaster:* First, these messages from the Merchant Caste.

## LETTERS ON HATE CRIME LAW

### Readers who hate (2) and like (1) hate crime law

**T**hank you, thank you, and thank you, for your article on hate crime law (“*I Told You, I Told You, and I Told You*” – PIQUE, September). Like you, I have been horrified about these laws from day one and think they are only dangerous.

With your permission, I would like to republish your article in the September issue of Common Sense for the Lakeland humanists. Thank you again!

– *Nan Owens* (“*I think, therefore I inquire*”), Editor of Common Sense, the newsletter of the Humanist Association of West Central Florida (HAWCF)

**I**am in complete agreement with you on the evils of “hate crime” legislation. If I am getting knifed by some guy out to kill anybody at random and some gay guy across the street is knifed by a homophobe, I feel that both crimes are equally vile for the act itself, and not the thoughts behind it. But as per our p.c. hate crimes law, the attack on the gay guy is much worse than the one on me because he is being targeted for what group he belongs to. What absolute rot! – *Dennis Middlebrooks*

**T**he strong condemnation of our current “hate laws” by John Rafferty, PIQUE’s Editor, invites one to look at the subject from a libertarian viewpoint. His point that “hate crime is a dangerous, unconstitutional weapon to put in the hands of pandering politicians and headline-hungry prosecutors” is understandable. He made the case first eleven years ago, and today repeats his objection to the laws, particularly against his perceived expansion of the law into more areas.

The argument that hate laws are ambiguous and that the law punishes people “for what they think” does not deal with the laws’ original intent. Hate crimes fall into several categories: laws defining specific bias-motivated acts as distinct crimes; criminal penalty-enhancement laws; laws creating a distinct civil cause of action for hate crimes, and laws requiring administrative agencies to collect hate crime statistics.

Agreed that the laws have grown beyond the original remedy, i.e., to punish crimes that led to death or physical injury. Laws that can be prosecuted may be classified as “bias” laws and are less constitutionally defensible and more open to abuse by prosecutors. Nevertheless, crimes originating from hatred and prejudice that fall into the first group—from lynching to cross burning to vandalism of houses of worship—are not new. They have been part of the American landscape for a long time. Historically, the FBI investigated what we now call hate crimes as far back as the early 1920s when they opened the first Ku Klux Klan case.

Rafferty’s argument does not deal with this aspect of hate crimes adequately. However corrosive, prejudices, bias, and hatred of groups that are different don’t always lead to crime. For some individuals these hatreds do have real consequences; they can lead to murder. It may be true

that the public mistakenly sees “the classic hate crime as an assault born of animus against a particular ethnicity or sexual orientation.” However few the occurrences, they have occurred and will occur in the future.

How then should the law deal with crimes resulting from hatred and prejudices? Prosecutors have sought a legal basis to pursue the perpetrators of hate crimes that lead to death or severe injury. That the hate crime law is the instrument to prosecute crimes that may not lead to murder or physical injury may be questioned; the use made of the law in the Queens case cited is patently overreaching and not what the law intended. We should be vigilant to curtail such use.

More interestingly, hate laws have been internationalized and have focused on war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. Are these, too, a case of prosecutorial overstepping? Are the mass killers of Muslims, Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins and others in the former Yugoslavia being unjustly prosecuted?

Yes, we are talking about American laws and our Constitutional guarantees, but obviously the problem is wider. In this context, hate crimes may be seen as “crimes against humanity.” Possibly, reclassifying hate crimes that lead to a murder as a crime against humanity would make them more understandable and unacceptable. The taking of a human life because we dislike, fear, or morally censure another’s beliefs is not humane. However labeled, some means of preventing and punishing the individual whose thoughts lead to a crime is necessary in a world where destruction is more easily possible and probable.

The common and difficult task for liberals and for humanists is to find a remedy to balance punishment for murder against the undesired punishment of people “for what they think.” – *Remo Cosentino*

*Response:* Remo, I’m unconvinced, even by your carefully-reasoned argument. “Hate crime” is still “thought crime” and, to my mind and sensibility, abominable. – JR

### THEOLOGIAN OF THE MONTH: LADY GAGA

**T**he 24-year-old performer who has sold over 15 million albums and 40 million singles worldwide, and whose fashion choices include wearing costumes made of meat, has posted on her website:

*It’s hard to believe that G-d hasn’t been watching out for me when I’ve had so many obstacles with drugs, rejection and people not believing in me. It’s been a long and continuous road. But it’s hard to just chalk it all up to myself. I have to believe there’s something greater than myself.*

*Comment:* Depend upon it, Lady. – JR

### REALIST OF THE MONTH: WOODY ALLEN

*To me, there’s no real difference between a fortune teller or a fortune cookie and any of the organized religions. They’re all equally valid or invalid, really. And equally helpful.*

– Quoted in the NYTimes, September 15.

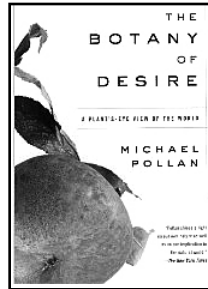
## SHSNY BOOK CLUB: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2010

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 14,  
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  
*THE BOTANY OF DESIRE:  
A Plant's-Eye View of the World*  
by Michael Pollan**

Working in his garden one day, Michael Pollan hit pay dirt in the form of an idea: do plants, he wondered, use humans as much as we use them? The result is a fascinating and engaging look at the true nature of domestication.

Erudite, engaging and highly original, journalist Pollan's fascinating account of four everyday plants and their coevolution with human society challenges traditional views about humans and nature. Using the histories of apples, tulips, potatoes and cannabis to illustrate the complex, reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world, he shows how these species have successfully exploited human desires to flourish. "It makes just as much sense to think of agriculture as something the grasses did to people as a way to conquer the trees," Pollan writes as he seamlessly weaves little-known facts, historical events and even a few amusing personal anecdotes to tell each species' story. His clear, elegant style enlivens even his most scientific material, and his wide-ranging references and charming manner do much to support his basic contention that man and nature are and will always be "in this boat together." — *Paperback*



*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, November 4, 6:30-8:00  
at the Muhlenberg Library  
*GUNS, GERMS, AND STEEL:  
The Fates of Human Societies*  
by Jared Diamond**

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, by National Medal of Science winner Diamond "... is a brilliantly written, passionate, whirlwind tour through 13,000 years of history on all the continents — a short history of everything about everybody. The origins of empires, religion, writing, crops, and guns are all here. ... Its account of how the modern world was formed is full of lessons for our own future. After the first two pages, you won't be able to put it down." — *Paul Ehrlich* — *Paperback*

**Thursday, December 2, 6:30-8:00  
at the Muhlenberg Library  
*THE AGE OF EMPATHY:  
Nature's Lessons for a  
Kinder Society*  
by Franz de Waal**

A pioneer in primate studies, Frans de Waal sees our better side in chimps, especially our capacity for empathy. He has gathered ample evidence that our ability to identify with another's distress — a catalyst for compassion and charity — has deep roots in the origin of our species. It is a view independently reinforced by recent biomedical studies showing that our brains are built to feel another's pain."

"... proof positive that, like other creatures who hang out in herds, we've evolved to be empathetic. We don't just hear a scream, it chills us to the bone; when we see a smile, we answer with one of our own.

"... offers advice to cutthroat so-called realists: Listen to your inner ape." — *Paperback*

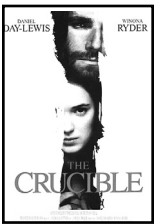
# SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2010

## SUNDAY, OCT 17, 12:30 p.m. OUR MONTHLY SHSNY BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER: NEW RESTAURANT!

We'll gather at BXL East, 210 East 51 Street, just east of 3rd Avenue, for outstanding Belgian fare, with dishes ranging from \$7 to \$16, and *prix-fixe* Sunday Brunch (including a drink) for \$17. Check it out at [bxlcafe.pgraphpic.com/](http://bxlcafe.pgraphpic.com/)

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

## MONDAY, OCT 18, 7:00 p.m. SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT Stone Creek Bar & Lounge 140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves) "THE CRUCIBLE"



The film version of Arthur Miller's parable of the 1950s anti-communist crusade, thinly veiled as the Salem witch trials of 1692. After be-

ing spurned by her married lover (Daniel Day-Lewis), young Abigail Williams (Winona Ryder) stirs up a frenzy of hysteria and fear with accusations of witchcraft.

*SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.* Check out Stone Creek's menu and prices online at [stonecreekny.com](http://stonecreekny.com)  
*November Movie 11/8: TBA*

**FOR UPDATES ON ALL SHSNY EVENTS ...**  
... check the website at [www.shsnny.org](http://www.shsnny.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/>

## GREAT LECTURES Premiere TUESDAY, OCTOBER 12, 7:00 - 9:00 p.m. Richard Dawkins "THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL?" Stone Creek Bar & Lounge 140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

A British TV documentary that was the precursor of Dawkins's 2006 best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, this fast-paced illustrated lecture, now on DVD, explores the unproven beliefs that are treated as factual by religion, and the real dangers to society of those delusions embraced by the religious.

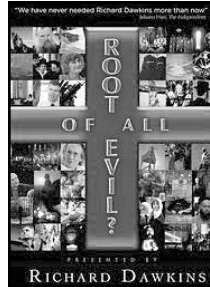
Each Great Lectures evening will begin with a viewing of a DVD, followed by a Q&A and general discussion led by SHSNY Board Member Bob Murtha.

*Great Lectures Night is FREE.*  
*Next: "The Virus of Faith," 11/9*

## Thursday, Oct 7, 6:30 p.m. Center for Inquiry in NYC Voices of Reason presents SAM HARRIS THE MORAL LANDSCAPE: How Science Can Determine Human Values

Questions of good and evil, right and wrong, are commonly thought unanswerable by science. But in his new book Sam Harris argues that science can—and should—be an authority on moral issues, shaping human values and setting out what constitutes a good life. At ...

**The New York Society  
for Ethical Culture  
64 St. & Central Park West**



## SHSNY FREETHOUGHT DAY CELEBRATION BRUNCH SUNDAY, OCTOBER 10, 12:00 NOON

Lecture & Discussion  
with philosopher and  
evolutionary biologist  
MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI  
author of  
*Nonsense on Stilts: How to  
Tell Science from Bunk,*  
on  
**CAN WE HAVE A SCIENCE  
OF MORALITY?**  
at historic  
PETE'S TAVERN  
129 East 18 Street  
(at Irving Place)



October is Freethought Month because on October 12, 1692, Governor William Phips of the Massachusetts Bay Colony declared that "spectral evidence" would no longer be admissible in court, thereby ending—for lack of real-world evidence—the Salem Witch Trials. Come join us to celebrate America's only holiday dedicated to reason, science and freethought.

Brunch at Pete's Tavern (*Est. 1864 - "the tavern O. Henry made famous"*) is just \$25 for your choice of 11 excellent entrees, one drink (Bloody Mary, Mimosa, etc.), plus coffee or tea, and including all taxes and tips.

**PRE-PAYMENT IS A MUST!**  
(The room only holds 48 people.)  
Pre-pay with PayPal, at [www.shsnny.org](http://www.shsnny.org)  
(use your PayPal account or your credit card)  
If you're not online, phone 212-308-2165 to reserve, and leave a call-back number.

**I'M REAL, YOU MAY OR MAY NOT BE**  
**A review of *Theory and Reality: An Introduction***  
**to the *Philosophy of Science*,**  
**by Peter Godfrey-Smith.**  
**Elaine Lynn**

For the last few centuries, philosophy has had a whole new realm of knowledge to address – the extent and complexity of what was once called natural philosophy, now called science, has gone so far as to have seemed a qualitative change in the world itself.

In his introduction to the philosophy of science, *Theory and Reality*, Peter Godfrey-Smith discusses how we have approached these issues and the ideas bubbling out of them. (Let me just mention up front that he thinks we're all real, but what would he know, anyway?)

Some have attempted to pull the traditional Western field of epistemology, (the nature of knowledge, the justification of beliefs, rationality), into psychology. It's tempting now that the cognitive sciences have given us such productive research programs. But, in fact, they haven't been able to address fundamental issues of the relationship between our perceptions and ideas, on the one hand, and the world outside us, on the other. Nor can they venture well into normative issues, the good and bad of things.

What makes science a distinct type of human intellectual activity?

Empiricists of many kinds claim the only source of real knowledge about the world is our experience. Science is especially successful because it is organized, systematic, and especially responsive to experience. Others have insisted it goes astray, as well, because its social structure and the larger societies which support it are distorted by their own culture.

Yet others maintain that the only true knowledge lies, not in individual experiences, but in understanding the basic deep patterns of the universe. Science is different from other kinds of investigation, and especially successful, because of its analysis of logical relationships and use of mathematical tools. Are the logical and mathematical relations the "real world?" Not completely. They are, however, the only meaningful, reliable description of our sensations, experience, or other interaction with the world outside ourselves.

This book covers the influence of many 20th century thinkers. You can follow the judgment of history, and the bias of this reviewer, by ignoring the Logical Positivists. Someone who thought he could improve the work of the Logical Positivists, Karl Popper, is a hero in science. He is famous for a principle he called falsificationism, i.e., only a hypothesis which can in practice be falsified by an observation is a truly scientific hypothesis. If there is no observation or fact that would disprove an assertion, it isn't even meaningful. This has been a clarifying notion

for more people than we can ever know.

Ironically, Popper believed that no idea was capable of confirmation, no matter how many instances of it you find, or how well it fits in with other relevant knowledge. His effort was to have a rigorous set of rules that would logically determine when a hypothesis is confirmed, but his effort was unsuccessful. That fact has been accepted by most philosophers of science and is referred to as Fallibilism, a term originally introduced in the 19th century by Charles Peirce.

We still have major problems in determining when we can increase our confidence in the accuracy of hypotheses based on positive experimental results. Popper refers to points at which we can make decisions to say something is true "in practice," but he says that would be different for different fields and he wasn't able to establish standards for these points. He does say that a series of positive observations can be regarded as "corroborating but not confirming," but we don't even have an internal logical rule for why something "corroborated" is a better choice than something completely untested.

Godfrey-Smith thinks that Popper has made a major contribution, though, by emphasizing the importance of riskiness, i.e., formulating scientific hypotheses that leave themselves open to falsification to the greatest degree possible.

Thomas Kuhn is another influential 20th century thinker who is well known in popular culture, or whose name, at least, is widely recognized. He is best known for his term "paradigm shifts," referring to major and fundamental reorientations in science. Godfrey-Smith thinks that his description of "normal science" is equally important and influential.

Did Kuhn really write that a paradigm shift, a shift in thinking, also changes the real world being thought about? Yes, he did. Did he really mean it? Well, sort of. There are many people whose names are remembered not because they made the best or most novel analysis of something but because they took an extreme position on it early in their careers, and then had the rest of their lives to write things qualifying their original position.

Godfrey-Smith author promotes a form of Naturalism as a promising philosophy of science. Unlike foundationalists, who believe it would corrupt philosophy to incorporate ideas from science, he believes that making use of scientific ideas and findings (and keeping in mind their contingent status) is often a valid use for them. He does not take the position here that only physical facts are real, pointing out, for example, that physics is sometimes too abstract to account for everything we can observe even indirectly.

The philosophy of science is not going to retreat into psychology; it still has for its own the normative questions that science can never answer. It has to analyze



the differences and similarities among sciences, and try to establish the relationships of scientific views to everyday “common-sense” ideas and thought processes. He sees the differences among the sciences starting to blur and, while others consider this a reduction to sloppiness and confusion, he thinks it is very promising. He’s an “optimistic scientific realist,” meaning he believes “we can be confident that science is succeeding in uncovering the basic structure of the world and how it works.” I guess that puts me among the “pessimistic scientific realists” who are skeptical on that score. I’m still puzzling over how we attained the abilities that don’t seem to have been necessary for natural selection. But I’m not suffering any existential despair over it.

## THE PLACE OF SCIENCE

Massimo Pigliucci

(Reprinted from *e-skeptic*, the email newsletter of *The Skeptics Society*, 3/10/2010)

*“Science bumps the ceiling of the corporeal plane... From the metaphysical point of view its arms, lifted toward a zone of freedom that transcends coagulation, form the homing arc of the ‘love loop.’ They are science responding to Eternity’s love for the productions of time.”*

This grandiose bit of poetical nonsense concludes a chapter of Huston Smith’s *Forgotten Truth*, dedicated to put science in its place. Smith is one of the world’s foremost authorities on religions, and his aim is to demonstrate that science is not an omnipotent force that can answer all the questions posed by the humanities. That is, science needs to be put in its place.

Fair enough, although I don’t know of any scientist who would claim otherwise. Contrary to what many anti-intellectuals maintain, science is by nature a much more humble enterprise than any religion or other ideology. This must be so, given the self-correcting mechanisms that are incorporated into the scientific process, regardless of the occasional failures of individual scientists.

But what is most astounding in Smith’s essay is his attempt to develop a parallel between science and mysticism in order to “demonstrate” that the world’s great religions are capable of insights at least as powerful as science’s because they actually use similar tools. Let us then briefly examine this alleged parallelism and in the process try to understand what the proper place of both science and religion ought to be.

Smith’s first insight is that science and religion both claim that things are not as they seem. For example, you have the perception that the chair on which you are sitting is solid, but modern physics will tell you that it is made of mostly empty space. This, apparently, is analogous to the following bit from C.S. Lewis:

“Christianity claims to be telling us about another world, about something behind the world we can touch and hear and see.” Never mind, of course, that physicists can bring sophisticated empirical evidence to support their claim about the emptiness of space, while Christianity is made up of a series of fantastic and contradictory stories backed by no evidence whatsoever.

Second, according to Smith, both science and religion claim that the world is not only different from what we perceive, but that there is “more” than we can see, and that the additional part is “stupendous.” Of course, electrons, quarks and neutrinos are “more” than we can see, although they are stupendous only to those few scientists who spend their lives working on them. Well, this is apparently the same as Shankara’s “notion of the extravagance of his vision of the *summum bonum* when he says that it cannot be obtained except through the merits of 100 billion well-lived incarnations,” a cornerstone of some Indian sacred text. I hope you are starting to appreciate the depths of the similarities between science and religion. But wait, there is more.

The two quests for truth also share the quality that this “more” that they seek to explore cannot be known in ordinary ways (otherwise, presumably, one would need neither science nor religion to get there). Science’s ways lead to apparent contradictions, such as in the case of some aspects of quantum mechanical theory. To which Smith juxtaposes some gems from Christian literature that he says uncannily resemble modern notions of quantum physics. For example, did not Nicholas of Cusa (*De Visione Dei*) write that “the wall of the Paradise in which Thou, Lord, dwellest is built of contradictories,” pretty much like the dual particle-wave nature of light? And did not Dionysius the Areopagite (*The Divine Names*) say “He is both at rest and in motion, and yet is in neither state,” thus anticipating Heisenberg’s indeterminacy principle? I am not making the examples up – these are Smith’s very own.

Fourth, both science and religion have found other ways of knowing this “more” which cannot be accessed by our ordinary senses. The language through which science accomplishes this is mathematics; the one of religion is, of course, mysticism, which Smith describes as a “comparably specialized way of knowing reality’s highest transcorporeal reaches” (whatever that means). This, according to Smith, is “not a state to be achieved but a condition to be recognized, for God has united his divine essence with our inmost being. *Tat tvan asi*; That thou art. Atman is Brahman; samsara, Nirvana.”

Yes, of course.

The fifth parallelism is that in both science and religion these alternative ways of knowing need to be properly cultivated. A scientist needs to dedicate a lifetime to her education and research if she wants to

make a contribution. This is apparently similar to the asceticism of saints because, as Bayazid “correctly” pointed out, “The knowledge of God cannot be attained by seeking, but only those who seek it find it.”

Finally, in both science and religion profound knowing requires instruments. In science, these are microscopes, telescopes and particle accelerators. In religion, the equivalent is provided by the Revealed Texts, “Palomar telescopes that disclose the heavens that declare God’s glory.” If gods who dictate texts are not palatable to you, there is an alternative: “Spirit (the divine in man) and the Infinite (the divine in its transpersonal finality) are identical—man’s deepest unconscious is the mountain at the bottom of the lake.”

Get it?

I would not have bothered the reader with this mountain of nonsense if it came from the local televangelist screaming bloody hell against the humanists’ corruption of the world. But this is Huston Smith, one of the most respected intellectual exponents of modern religionism, one who is hailed as offering the deepest insights that not just one, but all the world’s religions can offer!

This is a maddening example of what Richard Dawkins (in *Unweaving the Rainbow*) called “bad poetry.” Metaphors make much of the world’s literature a pleasure to read, but they can also be exceedingly misleading. There is no parallel whatsoever between science and religion. One can practice one or the other or both, but to pretend that they yield common insights into the nature of the world is an intellectual travesty. To go further, as Smith and so many religionists do, and assert that science is arrogant because it claims to provide the best answers to a circumscribed set of questions is astonishing, especially when the alleged alternative is so obviously the result of Pindaric flights of imagination.

Now, here is my modest proposal: what if religions would treat themselves to a little dose of humility? Imagine what the world would be like in that case.

## WHEN STUPID PEOPLE DON’T KNOW THEY ARE STUPID

Chauncey DeVega

(Excerpted from *AlterNet.com*, 9/2/10)

*Note: This essay, excerpted, accompanied a 13-minute video of interviews of people at Glenn Beck’s August “Restoring Honor” rally during which, political opinions aside, it was obvious that the less people knew, the more vehement they were about their “facts.” — JR*

**T**he Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias in which an unskilled person makes poor decisions and reaches erroneous conclusions, but their incompetence denies them the metacognitive ability to realize their mistakes. The unskilled therefore suffer from illusory superiority, rating their own ability as

above average, much higher than it actually is, while the highly skilled underrate their own abilities, suffering from illusory inferiority. This leads to the situation in which less competent people rate their own ability higher than more competent people. It also explains why actual competence may weaken self-confidence: because competent individuals falsely assume that others have an equivalent understanding. “Thus, the miscalibration of the incompetent stems from an error about the self, whereas the miscalibration of the highly competent stems from an error about others.”

Similar notions have been expressed—albeit less scientifically—for some time. ... [But] the hypothesized phenomenon was tested in a series of experiments performed by Justin Kruger and David Dunning, then both of Cornell University. They quote Charles Darwin (“Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge”) and Bertrand Russell (“One of the painful things about our time is that those who feel certainty are stupid, and those with any imagination and understanding are filled with doubt and indecision.”)

The Dunning-Kruger effect is not, however, concerned narrowly with high-order cognitive skills (much less their application in the political realm during a particular era, which is what Russell was talking about. Nor is it specifically limited to the observation that ignorance of a topic is conducive to overconfident assertions about it, which is what Darwin was saying. Indeed, Dunning, et al, cite a study saying that 94 percent of college professors rank their work as “above average” (relative to their peers), to underscore that the highly intelligent and informed are hardly exempt. Rather, the effect is about paradoxical defects in perception of skill, regardless of the particular skill and its demands, whether it is chess, playing golf or driving a car.

*Comment: Coincidentally, in his “A Dictionary of the Near Future” Op-Ed piece in the New York Times September 13, suggesting neologic terms we need right now, Douglas Copeland offered: “Rosenwald’s Theorem: The belief that all the wrong people have self-esteem.” — JR*

## GARRISON KEILLOR ON ANTI-ELITISM

(Excerpted from *salon.com*, 1/26/10)

**B**e as anti-elitist as you like, but when the surgeon comes in to open up your skull to see what that big dark spot on the CT scan was, you don’t want him to be wearing a humorous T-shirt (“*Hey It IS Brain Surgery*”) and eating Jujubes.

You board the DC-10 to London and you’d like to see a lean guy with a military-style crew cut, an overachiever, not a guy with hair in his eyes who is really, really into his own music. Your life may depend on an arrogant elitist who happens to know what he’s doing.

## TURKEY'S CHOICE, AN ISLAMIC TROJAN HORSE?

Tunç İyriboz

On September 12, with an impressive 73 percent turnout hailed by President Obama as democratic “vibrancy,” more than 38 million Turkish citizens voted in a referendum on important constitutional amendments. The 58 percent “Yes” outcome was unexpectedly higher than predicted by recent polls.

From one point of view, the results can be interpreted as highly positive for improving the country's democratic record. The referendum introduces key constitutional amendments improving the rights of the individual, strengthening gender equality, eliminating discrimination against children, the elderly, the disabled and veterans, and enhancing rights to privacy. These changes are considered universally noncontroversial, and are supported both by the secular opposition (traditionally left-leaning), and the sponsoring political party in power, the controversially Islamic-leaning AKP, led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The amendments were also required to support Turkey's accession to the European Union.

According to another point of view, bitterly voiced by the opposing secular establishment – including the military – the proposed modifications actually represent an Islamic Trojan Horse, i.e., the democratic amendments were used to camouflage other clauses that radically alter the way the judicial and military entities function, disrupting the separation of powers. These include clauses that empower civilian courts to try military personnel, allowing prosecution of coup organizers. On the judicial front are increases to the number of justices on the Constitutional Court, and to the number of members on the Judges and Prosecutors Higher Board. The secular opposition claims Erdoğan plans to use these to fill the courts with Islamists, pushing the country to the edge of a quiet Islamic coup. AKP maintains that its political stance is no different than European Christian Democratic parties, in a Muslim flavor.

Turkey has been a secular democracy since the 1920s, one of the most successful attempts to implement a working modern democracy with an overwhelmingly Muslim constituency. This unusual accomplishment has not been easy: democratic history has been interrupted by military *coups d'état* in 1960, 1971, and 1980, and two more recent soft coups – “military memoranda” – in 1997 and 2007. Most of these political turning points included some justification to keep religiously motivated political movements under control and preserve the strongly secular quality of the state. They have introduced periods of democratic regression, which have become obstacles on the country's path to become the modern European state Mustafa Kemal intended.

It has become increasingly inappropriate for Turkey to fall back to such totalitarian methods, particularly as the prospect of European Union membership intensifies. Developments leading to this referendum make another military coup highly unlikely to ever happen again. If the Trojan Horse claim is true, the regime in Turkey will find itself under increasing religious influence. However, the constitution remains staunchly secular, and the democracy increasingly vibrant. With this referendum, Turkey may have made of itself the perfect laboratory to test whether Islam today has reached the potential of behaving as Christianity has in Western democracies.

If Turkey fails this test, that is, if the Islamic penetration of the branches of the government reaches a turning point that leads to an Islamic constitution and law, one can expect the political landscape of the Middle East to change for the worse in the next few decades. Such a transformation could lead to an extremely unstable Middle East, not unlikely to facilitate the next World War. If it wins, that is, if Turkey maintains its secular definition of state, while allowing a diverse, fair and uninterrupted Western style democracy to thrive, we will have reason to be optimistic about the future of the rest of the Muslim world. Sam Harris' thesis that there is a certain *je ne sais quoi* about Islam that makes such cohabitation impossible would be proven wrong. We should actually all hope and root for that.

Now, I don't mean, of course, root for Islam. What I mean is, change the way we deal with it. Like its older Abrahamic siblings, Islam has proved that it is not easily going away. It is not exactly giving us a choice. In Turkey, of all places, after 90 years of attempts to repress, neutralize and regulate, Islam is back in full power.

The approach to Islam now needs to be different. We should look for ways to better understand it, to make it work with modern western democracies, find civilized ways of cohabiting with it as has been possible with the older Abrahamic religions in the West. Certainly, due to its relatively young age, this religion is still going through its violent adolescence, unlike its more mature and established Abrahamic relatives.

Places like Turkey, which have experienced a relatively accelerated path to modernity, may represent the best setting for finding a non-violent coexistence with reason.

### THE GREAT DEBATE CONTINUES

(Forwarded from [www.toothpastefordinner.com](http://www.toothpastefordinner.com) by Colin Rafferty)

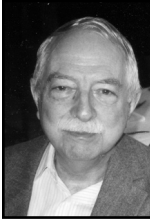
**Priest:** God made everything and watches over everyone. We know because he told some people a while back.

**Scientist:** That's ridiculous. The universe is made up of eleven-dimensional vibrating strings.

## GEORGE ROWELL 1929 – 2010

George Rowell, an original member of SHSNY and for many years both a Board member and the Society's Membership Coordinator, died August 20 at the age of 81. A gentle and gentlemanly man whose presence at SHSNY events was a given until his health began to fail, George will be missed.

George Peters Rowell IV was born and grew up in St. Petersburg, Florida, enlisted in the Army and served in the 325th Infantry with the post-WW II occupation forces in Japan. In 1948 he enrolled at Washington and Lee, was a member of Delta Epsilon fraternity, excelled academically, was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, and graduated with honors in 1952. He received a scholarship to Columbia University, which brought him to New York, where he lived the rest of his life. He earned an M.A. in Slavic languages and entered the publishing business, spending the last decade as Circulation Manager of Johnson Publishing. – *Peter Rowell*



George loved reading and continually learning about ancient history, cultures and myths, including Greek and Nordic legends, as well as poetry and books about his boyhood home in Florida. He was an avid amateur student of philology, devoured science and skeptical periodicals, and was a devoted contributor to liberal

causes within his modest means. – *Milt Verstandig*

For years, George heroically cared for a blind friend who had lost his sight to one of the diseases endemic in Africa when he was a correspondent there. George took him for a walk every day, and when his friend died, George was severely depressed, seeming to have lost much of his purpose in life.

We often invited him to lunch at the Petaluma, an Italian restaurant near his home. He always enjoyed it, with a good cheer. – *John and Gabriele Arents*

### BE AFRAID, BE VERY AFRAID, AND STICK TO YOUR DIET ON HALLOWEEN

(Excerpted from an Americans United press release, "Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network Warns Americans of 'Demonic' Halloween Candy," 10/29/09.)

Pat Robertson is warning Americans: Demons may be lurking in our Halloween candy.

On Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network's website, writer Kimberly Daniels asserts that "demons" sneak into bags of Halloween candy at grocery stores.

"Most of the candy sold during this season has been dedicated and prayed over by witches," Daniels wrote. "I do not buy candy during the Halloween season. Curses are sent through the tricks and treats of the innocent whether they get it by going door to door or by purchasing it from the local grocery store. The demons cannot tell the difference."

Plus ...  
SHSNY Freethought Day  
Brunch at Pete's Tavern  
Sunday, October 10  
Page 7

Understanding  
stupid people.  
Page 10

How real is real, really?  
Page 8

"Ground Zero Mosque"?  
No such animal.  
Page 1

