

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May, 2011

This month we consider unbelief writ large in advertising and small in our individual stories. We reaffirm some (non-)political guidelines, then get all mixed up in politics, and consider gun control as a humanist cause. We nominate a Dumbth retreat, wonder where Galileo went wrong, evaluate ethics on escalators, modesty in the public square, and an imbalance in the democracy trade. Finally, we propose a new holiday as we end just as we begin, with an important date. – JR

HERE IT COMES: NO POSTPONEMENT, AND MARK YOUR CALENDARS

As we informed you in February, the world is going to end on May 21. This month. In 21 days, in fact. Really. The news is being proclaimed on billboards throughout the South and on over sixty radio stations of the Family Radio network up and down the East Coast and as far west as Kansas City.

“He Is Coming Again” the billboards announce, the message paid for by fans of Family Radio, who have discovered the truth of the timing of the long-awaited Second Coming through the calculations of Family Radio founder Harold Camping.



But not a word of this literally earth-shattering news is being reported in the mainstream media, and we have heard not a single word of caution or advice from the Obama administration. Why? What, in their America-hating, socialist-Muslim-radical-feminist-inspired agenda are they hiding from us?

Allison Warden, a volunteer with WeCanKnow.com, a website set up by followers of Family Radio, warns us that “the Rapture is going to be a great day for God’s people but awful for everyone else.”

So, cancel your subscriptions, cash in your bonus miles and discount coupons, buy only ripe bananas, and fall down on your knees to pray for God’s forgiveness as the world comes to a shuddering, screeching halt on May 21.

Then watch for our eschatology update and perfectly plausible explanation on May 22.

WHY WE NEED ATHEIST AD CAMPAIGNS

Greta Christina

(Excerpted from “Spreading the Good News About Atheism: Why We Need Atheist Ad Campaigns,” on *AlterNet.org*, March 28, 2011)

Atheist ad campaigns are everywhere. Around the U.S. and around the world, atheist organizations have been buying space on billboards, buses, TV and more, with messages ranging from the mild-mannered “Don’t believe in God? You are not alone” to the in-your-face “You know it’s a myth.” The current “Living Without Religion” campaign from the Center for Inquiry, letting the world know that “You don’t need God – to hope, to care, to love, to live” – is only the latest in a series of advertising blitzes: from American Atheists, the Coalition of Reason, the American Humanist Association, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and many other organizations. Even local student atheist groups have been getting into the act, using buses in their college towns to spread the good news about atheism.

And whenever they do, they are almost guaranteed to garner resistance. Conservative religionists often object vehemently to the very concept of atheist advertising: in many cases trying to get the ad campaigns stopped altogether, and frequently even vandalizing the billboards. (In what has to be the irony of the year, some bus companies have stopped accepting all religious-themed ads, simply so they don’t have to accept ads from atheists.) And while moderate and progressive believers have never (to my knowledge) tried to stop these atheist ad campaigns from moving forward, many are still baffled and even offended by the ads. They see them as proselytizing, evangelical, and they don’t understand why people who are opposed to

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religion would be proselytizing and evangelical.

So why do atheists do this? Why do atheists spend substantial amounts of money and resources to let the world know we exist, and to get our ideas across?

The first thing you have to remember is this: Not all atheist ad campaigns are created equal. Different atheist organizations create different ad campaigns, with different goals, and different strategies for achieving those goals. So when you ask, "Why do atheists have to advertise?" the first question you have to answer is, "Which atheists?"

Some atheist ad campaigns, for instance, are purely about visibility. The sole message behind them: "Atheists exist." The folks behind these campaigns know that visibility is key to acceptance of atheists – just as it's key to acceptance of LGBT people. Simply getting people familiar with atheists, and getting them comfortable with the concept of atheism, goes a long way to countering anti-atheist prejudice and hostility. What's more, the folks behind these campaigns know that plenty of non-believers feel isolated—cut off from family and friends if they're open about their atheism, hiding in secrecy and silence if they're not—and they want these people to know they aren't alone. It's like the annual Coming Out Day for LGBT people.

Other ad campaigns are about information. They're there to counter myths about atheists. They're telling you, "Atheists exist, and are good, happy people." Misinformation and bigotry against

atheists abound, and many atheist ad campaigns—including the current "Living Without Religion" from the Center for Inquiry—are aimed at countering this misinformation. They're aimed at letting the world know that, contrary to popular opinion, atheists have morality, meaning, joy, and hope in our lives, just as much as religious believers. It's like a public service information campaign, letting you know that, contrary to popular opinion, HIV is a treatable illness/ Arab Americans are your peaceful hard-working neighbors/ the library is open late on Thursdays.

Still other campaigns are trying to gain new members for their atheist groups. They aren't necessarily trying to persuade anyone out of religion, but they know there are non-believers in their communities, people who feel isolated, people who may even think they're the only ones who think they way they do. And they want those folks to know that atheist organizations are available: to provide community, support, education, entertainment, or simply to provide reinforcement for the idea that they aren't crazy or immoral for thinking the way they do. Like a softball team distributing flyers for new players, or AARP advertising for new members and letting you know about the wonderful programs they have available for people over 50.

And still others are, in fact, actively trying to change people's minds about religion. They're trying to persuade people that atheism is, you know, correct: that there is no God, and people should stop believing or, at the very least, consider the possibility that their beliefs might be mistaken.

Or they're trying to persuade people to respect the separation of church and state, even if they believe in God. Like Pepsi trying to persuade you to buy their products instead of Coke's, or Marriage Equality trying to get you to vote against Prop 8.

Of course, while these ad campaigns do have different goals, many of those goals dovetail and overlap. The "atheist visibility" folks may not be deliberately trying to persuade people out of religion, but since religion relies on social agreement to perpetuate itself, the mere act of saying "Atheists exist, not everyone believes in God" lays a small but powerful piece of dynamite under its foundations. The "deconversion" folks may be trying to get people to question their faith, but they're also getting atheism on a lot more people's radar. And while the "countering misinformation" campaigns aren't necessarily designed to increase group membership, that's often the effect.

And I would argue that every single one of these goals is valid. After all, they're valid for every other human endeavor. When it comes to every other human idea/ affiliation/activity/organization, we think it's perfectly reasonable for people to make themselves visible, to make

information available, to let others who might be interested know that a group exists, to persuade others who don't agree to change their minds. When it comes to politics, science, art, medicine, hobbies, philosophy, we consider it not only

acceptable, but positive and worthwhile to share our ideas, to get our points of view into the world, and to make our case when we really think we're right.

Why should atheism be the exception if it's okay for Democrats to run ads saying, "Vote Democratic"? ... for the Boston Red Sox to run ads saying, "Go Sox"? ... for the Red Hot Organization to run ads saying, "Safe sex is hot sex"? ... for Greenpeace to run ads saying (seriously), "There's probably no cod, now let's stop overfishing and think of the future"? Then why on Earth is it not okay for the Center for Inquiry to run ads saying, "You don't need God – to hope, to care, to love, to live"? Or even for American Atheists to run ads saying, "You know it's a myth"?

Why should religion, alone among all other ideas, be entitled to a free ride, free from criticism and questioning and the uncomfortable reminder that not everyone in the world agrees with it?

In fact, when you look at the ugly responses atheist ad campaigns typically get, the need for them becomes even more obvious. Religious believers have called the ad campaigns "aggressive," "hateful," "offensive," "a disgrace," "political correctness gone amok," "terrible," "disturbing" and "dangerous." They've said that they "have had their sensibilities assaulted" by the ads, that their beliefs were being "attacked" and "vandalized." They've suggested that someone "accidentally burn" the billboards. They've equated atheist advertisers with Fred Phelps. And these responses are hardly isolated: they're very much in



line with general American sentiments about atheists, the most disliked and distrusted minority in America.

Of course atheists need visibility – lots of people are bigoted about us. Of course we need to spread information about who we are – lots of people are ignorant about us. Of course we need to let other atheists know that support networks are available – lots of people are hateful about us. Of course we need to advocate for separation of church and state – lots of people want to make it actually illegal for us to advertise. The very hostility that the atheist ad campaigns generate proves why we need them so badly.

Now, some people may think I'm being a hypocrite here. Some people think that religious evangelism sucks, whether it's atheists or believers doing the "evangelizing," and they think it's hypocritical for atheists to cut slack for the atheist ad campaigns. "Sure, she doesn't like religious proselytizing," these folks are probably saying, "but she thinks it's totally okay for atheists to try to swell their ranks and change people's minds! How is that fair?"

But these people would be mistaken.

Because I don't, in fact, have any objection to religious evangelists trying to change people's minds. Don't get me wrong. I have serious objections to many of the religious evangelists' methods. I object to their use of fear-mongering as a form of persuasion; to their offering of false hope; to the way they present unsubstantiated opinion as authoritative fact. I object to their arrogant use of personal experience as the keystone of their case, with little or no understanding of the fallibility of the human mind. I object to their dismissal and even contempt of the most fundamental notions of evidence and reason. I object to their use of social pressure and even shunning to enforce complicity and to silence dissent within their ranks. I object to their knocking on people's doors at eight in the morning on a Saturday.

But I do not have any objection whatsoever to the basic idea of religious believers trying to persuade people that they're right. None. If they think they're right, then that's exactly what they ought to do. That's how the marketplace of ideas works: people share their ideas, they make the case for their ideas, and (in theory, anyway) in the long run the best idea wins. In fact, if these believers were right, and our eternal afterlives in bliss or torment really were contingent on believing the right religion? Then not trying to persuade others to share the faith would be objectionable. Immoral, even. Callous to the point of being monstrous. I disagree passionately with their case, I disagree with how they typically make that case, but I have not even the slightest objection to the idea of their making it.

And I'm not afraid of them. I think the case for atheism is better than the case for religion, by several orders of magnitude. I think that, when stripped of the fear-mongering and social pressure and unsubstantiated opinion and so on, religion falls apart almost laughably fast. I think that religion is a house of cards built inside a fortress, and when the fortress of excuses and diversions and non-arguments gets breached, the actual case for religion is so flimsy it's almost pathetic. I think atheism is correct; I think the case

for atheism is winning, and will continue to win, and I'm not afraid of religious believers making their case.

And the fact that so many believers are afraid of atheists making our case? That just makes my point for me.

Atheists aren't the ones trying to shut up religious believers. When religious ads go up on buses and billboards and TV, we roll our eyes and go about our business. We don't agree with the advertisers, but we don't try to stop them from advertising. Sure, we're trying to get religious messages out of government—no Ten Commandments in City Halls, no creationism in public schools, no prayers to start city council meetings, etc.—but that's a separation of church and state issue. (One that works for religious believers just as much as it does for atheists, I might point out.) When it comes to religious groups hawking their message on their own private property—or on other people's private property they've rented with their own money—we may think it's obnoxious or silly, but we totally respect their right to do it.

And the fact that so many believers don't respect atheists' right to hawk our message? It just shows how weak their message is – and how afraid they are of having it contradicted. As my wife Ingrid points out, "If you've got God on your side, why are you so afraid of a billboard?"

If religionists thought their case for God was strong, they wouldn't be trying to silence atheists. And the fact that they are trying to silence atheists, all by itself, is Exhibit A for exactly why we need to keep advertising.

EPIPHANY Giddian Beer

I recall. Springtime 1946, probably a weekend or Easter vacation because it was mid-afternoon and I was alone in my room doing – something. On the radio, a hellfire-and-damnation preacher bloviating about "stupid, evil heathens." In those days programming was eclectic. News, popular music, comedy, talk, opera, baseball, preaching—including diatribes like the one I was hearing, but not listening to—would be broadcast from time to time on the same station.

I'd been bar mitzvah a few months before and had sworn that I would attend services every Saturday. I never did. However, I believed that a benign God supervised the world and knew of me, so I prayed occasionally. I believed that evil was punished and playing by the rules was rewarded, that sex was dirty and that good girls (which included almost all of them) wanted only to marry clean-cut, hard-working guys and have babies. Everyone I knew believed such things, even those who ignored them with obvious impunity.

I believed the sanitized history taught in school. For example: that the "one God" realization had saved humanity from the foolishness of polytheism, that the Crusades were a glorious campaign to rescue the Holy Land from Muslims, and that the U.S. was the most virtuous of nations, with no stain on its history except slavery which had been corrected

by the civil war.

I was aware of blemishes. There were the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust, the lynchings in the U.S. south, the evidence that too often suffering (disease, injury, privation) is inflicted on the most innocent while gratification (wealth, power, pleasure) is awarded to the most evil. I had recently discovered details of just how despicably my country had abused the Indians. I was learning more about the prejudice against and maltreatment of immigrant and ethnic groups. Very troubling.

But these were exceptions, weren't they? Anyway, there were the reassuring sophistries: "God loves you"; "Good triumphs over evil, if not in this life, then the next."; "We cannot understand the mind of God."; "You have to have faith!"

After a while, just who the radio preacher was calling "stupid, evil heathens" penetrated my consciousness - the Chinese. What the f**k? I had assumed that he was ranting about witchcraft or voodoo or cannibalism or something like that - but *the Chinese*? That ancient culture, admired for its sophistication, its resilience, its respect for learning and for its strong family values. A people who had endured and suffered so much in the war! Absurd! Crazy!

If that voice of authority could be so stupidly wrong, how about others? During the following week or so I questioned everything I'd grown up with, the very bases of everything I knew. What if there wasn't even a God? Thinking about that, I realized how much it would explain: why good luck and bad luck, joy and misery are apportioned with such little regard to virtue or wickedness; how God could be on both sides in a war or an election; how sometimes "God's work" is murder and massacre; how the will and the characteristics of God differed from time to time, from place to place and from one religion, pastor or cleric to another. Most of all, it explained why the "mind of God" could not be understood.

With these recognitions the cacophony of contradictions in my brain abated, almost vanished. What a relief! Something like the relief that is felt when one is in a very noisy place and suddenly the noise stops. It felt that good!

So my bullshit detector was born. It's far from perfect, but it's always awake. Politicians, commentators and talking heads, spokespersons, advocates - nothing they say is to be accepted without examination. Teachers, advisers, scientists can be wrong. There are experts and there are "experts"; one needs to be alert. Religious authorities, futurists and anything labeled "THE TRUTH" are especially suspect.

Faith, for me, has been completely replaced by skepticism and by belief based only on evidence and/or experience. In this way outcomes conform better to expectations. Seeing how often the faithful are betrayed in their faith, this way is more comfortable.

I soon realized that the most prolific sources of the most egregious bullshit are those which: establish a dogma, discipline heretics and use bullshit to overwhelm dissent, as do all the monotheistic religions. Their objective is to spread and intensify faith, and they know that ignorance is its most

fertile soil. Their sophistries and their propagation of nonsense—such as the superposition of childish myth over cosmological and biological evidence—are tools for dumbing down and controlling people. The much extolled good that they do pales to insignificance when compared to the usually ignored conflict and suffering that they cause.

SHARE YOUR STORY

Giddian Beer, above, woke up on a lazy springtime afternoon - when did *you*? PIQUE wants *your* story. When did you lose faith? How and why did you discover reason and rationality? What were the steps on your journey to agnosticism or atheism or humanism? What was your "road to Damascus" moment? ("White light" and "voice from the heavens" stories will not be accepted.)

Please send your personal story, of 500-1,000 words (Giddian's is 792), to editor@shsny.org. Who knows - your "conversion story" might convert someone new. - JR

WANTING TO KNOW MAKES US MATTER from "Arcadia," by Tom Stoppard

Editor: The 1993 play is currently in revival on Broadway; the original production was better, but this wonderful, witty "play of ideas" skips brilliantly about such subjects as teenage sex, academic backbiting and fractal geometry, and is still very much worth seeing. - JR

Hannah and Valentine, modern-day intellectuals, are each pursuing their separate early-19th-century studies in an English manor house. Valentine is frustrated - sexually as well as intellectually - and no-nonsense Hannah is unaware she is part of his problem.

Hannah: You mustn't give up.

Valentine: Why? Didn't you agree with Bernard?

Hannah: Oh, that. It's all trivial. ... Comparing what we're looking for misses the point. It's wanting to know that makes us matter. Otherwise we're going out the way we came in. That's why you can't believe in the afterlife, Valentine. Believe in the after, by all means, but not the life. Believe in God, the soul, the spirit, the infinite, believe in angels, if you like, but not in the great celestial get-together for an exchange of views. If the answers are in the back of the book I can wait, but what a drag. Better to struggle on knowing that failure is final.

GALILEO WAS WRONG AND THE CHURCH WAS RIGHT. REALLY, JUST ASK THESE "SCHOLARS."

John Rafferty

Believe it or not, "The First Catholic Conference on Geocentrism" was held last November 6 at Notre Dame. Really? Notre Dame? Well, actually, according to the program, "at The Hilton Garden Inn, South Bend, Indiana (near Notre Dame)."

And "Catholic"? Well, um, it says so in the name of the conference, doesn't it? Even if there is no link to the actual, you know, "Church"?

So, if you think scientific stupidity is confined to the halls of Congress (see page 8), just scan the titles of some of the papers offered by people with “Dr.” and “Msgr.” titles affixed to their names, including: “Scientific Evidence: Earth in the Center of the Universe”; “Scientific Experiments Showing Earth Motionless in Space”; and, of course, “Geocentrism: They Know It But They’re Hiding It.”

Featured first on the website at geocentrism.com is the 2008 paper, “Is Geocentrism Possible?” by one Mark Wyatt, which announces in its opening paragraphs:

Every experiment ever designed to detect the motion of the earth has failed to detect earth’s motion and/or distinguish it from relative counter motion of the universe. So much so that this failure has become the bedrock of relativity theory. See [Galileo Was Wrong](#) [a link] for a full explanation of these experiments.

Many, many observations tell us that we are in or very near the center. But science applies unproven assumptions to make this go away (i.e., isotropy). They say that everywhere looks like the center. But they do not know that – they have never been anywhere else (anywhere in the solar system is our backyard). Stephen Hawking (in A Short History of Time) claims we make that assumption out of modesty (while verifying that there is no scientific evidence for it.)

Frankly, we just do not know. Science has its theories (based in naturalism and materialism – i.e., excluding the possibility of God’s intervention). Until we can step outside the universe and look in we cannot know. ...

On the other hand, Scriptures, the Church fathers, and a number of popes do tell us that the earth is stable and that the sun moves [around the earth].

Oh, well, okay then.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #117

(Excerpted from “Texas Bill Would Outlaw Discrimination Against Creationists” by Josh Harkinson on motherjones.com March 17, 2011)

Unlike many other states, Texas does not ban workplace discrimination based on gender identity, sexual orientation, or marital status. But don’t be alarmed; the Lone Star State is working on that whole civil liberties thing. Last week, Republican State Rep. Bill Zedler introduced HB 2454, a bill that would establish new workplace protections for proponents of intelligent design.

An institution of higher education may not discriminate against or penalize in any manner, especially with regard to employment or academic support, a faculty member or student based on the faculty member’s or student’s conduct of research relating to the theory of intelligent design or other alternate theories of the origination and development of organisms.

On the upside, maybe the University of Texas will be able to help a few of the folks who are falling through Texas’ fraying social safety net. Out of a job? Come up with an elaborate theory about how a flying spaghetti monster created the universe. A tenured professorship awaits.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #118

(Excerpted from “Kansas Legislator Virgil Peck Calls for Gunning Down Undocumented Immigrants,” by Tara Lohan, on AlterNet, March 14, 2011)

In the Kansas House Appropriations Committee, during a discussion of methods used to exterminate feral swine (which include shooting them from a helicopter), Rep. Virgil Peck (R-Tyro) suggested that the state government try the same approach as a solution to Kansas’ immigration problems.

“It looks like to me if shooting these immigrating feral hogs works maybe we have found a [solution] to our illegal immigration problem,” said Peck.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #119

The Utah legislature, in all its Solonic majesty, has made it official: the Browning M1911 semiautomatic pistol is declared the State Gun of Utah.

GUNS, HUMANISM AND SHSNY

To the Editor: Another fine issue [March, 2011]. Although Nicholas Kristol [“Autos Don’t Kill People, People ... Etc.”] does satirize the NRA via its stand-in, “NAA,” nonetheless, the huge “gorilla in the room” not mentioned by name, is the despicable NRA, and no one appears willing, able or ready to take it on frontally, as the continuing, primary obstacle to any form of gun control in our country.

It is absolutely pathetic and horrifying that a deranged person can go into a gun store and buy a 30-bullets-plus cartridge to be easily affixed to his already lethal 9mm gun so that he can massacre his alleged enemies more easily. Yet there is the Governor of Arizona, a member of and fully backed by the NRA, championing his right to do so, based on her perverted interpretation of the 2nd Amendment.

I support the Brady Campaign against gun violence and read their literature. They’re totally frustrated by the spinelessness of our political leaders, clear across the country, unable to take any stand in support of even the weakest gun control legislation, for fear of alienating the sacrosanct NRA. It’s a deplorable and pathetic situation.

This segues right into your commendable and strong request for our suggestions about where SHSNY should go to authenticate and grow its secular humanist identity right now. If a broad but accurate meaning of secular humanism means the promotion of the highest ideals of humanity in the here and now, then we should tackle the truly formidable problem of controlling the spread of guns and gun violence in our country.

As a society, we are repelled and disgusted by the wanton acts of massacre, as in the Arizona case. The furor after each such tragedy is like a Roman candle that glows brightly, only to go dark and to be forgotten after the media exhaust themselves. I think this issue has such universality that it’s a natural from a broadly moral point of view, and I strongly recommend it to be a part of SHSNY’s agenda.

– Stanley Friedland

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2011

SATURDAY, MAY 14
2:00 - 4:00 pm at the
Muhlenberg Branch Library
209 West 23 St. (at 7th Av.)

SHSNY PRESENTS
a special lecture and discussion by
BARBARA FRIEDBERG, Ph.D.
"REASON AT THE CROSSROADS"

What a contrast between the need for clear thought today and the trivial or vicious uses to which so much of our clever media is put! Let us consider some methods of good practical reasoning, from Polya's "How to Solve It" to Mandela's ingenious race diplomacy.

Barbara Friedberg is an independent scholar focusing on intellectual method. A former math major, she has a doctorate in English Literature, and is a long-time member of SHSNY.

Dr. Friedberg will conduct an open-ended Q&A session after her lecture. Admission is free and open to the public.

TUESDAY, MAY 17
6:30 - 8:30 pm at

All Souls Unitarian Church, 1157 Lexington Ave. (79-80 Sts)
CENTER FOR INQUIRY - NEW YORK CITY

PRESENTS
VOICES OF REASON
SUSAN JACOBY: "NEVER SAY DIE"

Do you want to live to 100? Should we make a social priority out of medical research to increase longevity? Should Americans have a right to end their own lives with the legal help of doctors? Is living longer a good thing unless it means living better? Susan Jacoby, author of the newly published *Never Say Die: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age*, and program director of the Center for Inquiry-New York City, will discuss the ethics of longevity in American society on May 17 at All Souls Unitarian Church in a program co-sponsored by CFI-NYC and All Souls.

All Souls will offer a reception with wine and canapes at 6:30 p.m. The lecture will be followed by a question-and-answer session and booksigning. Admission is free and open to the public.

PLANNING AHEAD

Holidays, double bookings and other screwups and disasters aside, the *usual* monthly schedule of SHSNY events is:

Book Club: First Thursday
at the Muhlenberg Library.

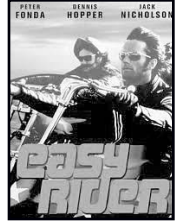
Movie Night: Second Monday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday
at BXL East Bistro.

Great Lectures: Fourth Tuesday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

MONDAY, MAY 9, 7:00 p.m.
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
"EASY RIDER"

The 1969 game-changer film that almost ruined Hollywood, as the big studios lost millions trying to duplicate its counterculture success.



With cash from a cocaine sale, bikers Billy (Peter Fonda) and Wyatt (Dennis Hopper, who also directed) chuck everything and ride toward New Orleans in search of America. Along the way they add boozy lawyer George — Jack Nicholson in the Oscar-winning role that made him a star.

Written by Fonda, Hopper and Terry Southern, and with a great rock soundtrack — *this* is the film that defined the Sixties.

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
Check out the menu and prices at www.stonecreeknyc.com

SUNDAY, MAY 15, 12 NOON
OUR MONTHLY BRUNCH
GET-TOGETHER

at BXL East, 210 East 51 St.

We'll meet at Noon at our new favorite bistro 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 \$18. Check it out at bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/

Everyone interested in getting together with 15-20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good grub (huge selection of beers!) and lively talk in a charming East-side setting is welcome.

Bring friends!

June brunch: 6/19

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2011

GREAT LECTURES

TUESDAY, MAY 24, 7 p.m.

"THE ATHEISM TAPES"

RICHARD DAWKINS

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

"Fascinating" – and even "hugely entertaining" – are the best words to describe the short interviews of six of today's leading men of letters and science – each discussing his intellectual journey to atheism – conducted by playwright and atheist Jonathan Miller for this 2004 BBC series.



This month Great Lectures leader Bob Murtha will present Miller's interview of Richard Dawkins, the best-known of today's "new atheists."

Ethologist, evolutionary biologist and hugely popular lecturer, Dawkins is the author of *The Selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker*, *The God Delusion* (a *NYTimes* best-seller) and, most recently, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*, among others. His is an opinionated, tough-minded, take-no-prisoners atheism, and the interview, as well as the live discussion among ourselves afterward, should be "fascinating," perhaps even "hugely entertaining."

To come: philosopher-theologian-atheist Denys Turner.

Great Lectures Night is FREE.
Part 6: June 28.

SCHEDULES CHANGE! CHECK FOR UPDATES

at 212-308-2165 ... on our website at www.shsny.org and/or www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, MAY 12, 6:30 pm

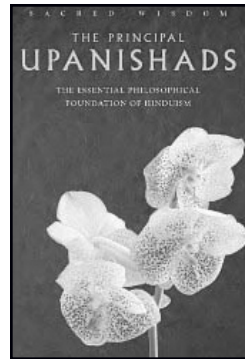
Muhlenberg Branch Library
209 West 23 St. (at 7th Av.)

THE PRINCIPAL

UPANISHADS:

The Essential Philosophical Foundation of Hinduism
(Sacred Wisdom)

The Upanishads, the sacred writings of Hinduism, predate recorded history. Since they were "revealed" to the Rishis of the Vedic civilization some 5,000 to 10,000 years ago, many have come to regard these "divine conversations" as perhaps the greatest of all the books in the history of world religions, the work that contains the kernel of the mystical and philosophical truths that form the basis of all religious thinking today. An \$11 hardcover edition is translated by Alan Jacobs, with an introduction by David Frawley.



Jacobs has used free modern verse to convey the essential meaning and poetry of the original text, omitting Sanskrit words as much as possible and providing a clear, contemporary commentary.

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.

June Book Club

Thursday, June 2, 6:30 pm
TALIBAN: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia (2nd Edition)
by Ahmed Rashid

"The single best book available on the Taliban." Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistani journalist who has personally interviewed many of the Taliban's leaders (and whose rage against them comes to the surface). Originally published before September 11, 2001 (and updated in this 2d Edition), *Taliban* is essential reading for all who hope to understand the aftermath of that black day. It includes details on how and why the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, the government's oppression of ordinary citizens (especially women), the heroin trade, oil intrigue, and bin Laden's sinister rise to power. — *Paperback*

July Book Club

Thursday, July 7, 6:30 pm
BRAINTRUST: What Neuroscience Tell Us About Morality
by Patricia Churchland

What is morality? Where does it come from? And why do most of us heed its call most of the time? In *Braintrust*, neurophilosophy pioneer Patricia Churchland argues that morality originates in the biology of the brain. She describes the "neurobiological platform of bonding" that, modified by evolutionary pressures and cultural values, has led to human styles of moral behavior. The result is a provocative genealogy of morals that asks us to reevaluate the priority given to religion, absolute rules, and pure reason in accounting for the basis of morality. — *Hardcover or Kindle*

NEWT GINGRICH WINS HIS THIRD DUMBTH-AWARD NOMINATION

Give Newt credit, he keeps trying, determined to win the SHSNY horse's-ass trophy. In 2008 he announced: "There is a gay and secular fascism in this country that wants to impose its will on the rest of us, is prepared to use violence, to use harassment." In 2010, he shocked even Chris Wallace on Fox News with, "The secular socialist machine represents as great a threat to America as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union once did."

Unfortunately for Newt, there have been candidates even crazier or dumber than him. Tying together secularists, fascists and violent gays didn't win for him, and neither did conflating secularism and socialism (with Nazi and communist comparisons hovering over), so a desperate Newt has abandoned any attachment to reality and logic, and upped the ante.

Speaking on March 27 at the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, the megachurch run by John Hagee, the way-to-the-right-of-Genghis-Khan pastor whose "Thank God for Hitler" sermon in 2008 frightened away Presidential candidate John McCain, the Newt worried out loud that:

... the U.S. could become "a secular atheist country, potentially one dominated by radical Islamists."

Wow, an atheist country run by Muslims! Who could have seen that coming?



HUMANISM, POLITICS AND THE PAGES OF PIQUE

John Rafferty

Can conservatives publish in PIQUE? That's a question I asked in these pages in March, 2003, during my rookie year as Editor. My answer then (and subsequently, as the question keeps coming up) was that although most of our members are political liberals ...

"Secular humanism itself is non-political, and neither this editor nor the SHSNY Board of Directors wants to exclude conservatives from PIQUE's readership ... or authorship. Hell, we need more readers and members, not fewer.

"Articles in PIQUE routinely debate not only questions of secular humanism, of religion and irreligion, but many of the most important (and contentious) political, social, and moral issues of our time ... but - and here's the important part - only from a secular humanist perspective. If you want to rant against George W. Bush's "faith-based initiatives," this is your forum; if you want to debate his tax policies, write a letter to The Times."

Why revisit the question? Because I received a one-word "Unsubscribe" message from a libertarian conservative reader immediately after he received April PIQUE. Since that issue featured excerpts by liberals Naomi Klein and

Tyler Kingkade, spiced with the John Stuart Mill quote that "Although it is not true that all conservatives are stupid people, it is true that most stupid people are conservative" (and no matter that the front page of the issue carried a reprint of a *NYTimes* Op-Ed column by conservative David Brooks), it took no Sherlockian deduction to guess what so annoyed a man who had complained about "liberal bias" before.

I genuinely regret losing any reader, but here's the problem: there is anti-rational, anti-science, anti-humanist nuttiness and mendacity going on on the right of our political spectrum such as I have never seen before during all of my (advanced) years.

No, please don't argue that it goes on on "both sides" - because that just ain't so. No one on the left is proclaiming that global warming is "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people," as is Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma. Indeed, according to a report on *alternet.org* on March 23, "More than half of the incoming Republican caucus denies the validity of climate change science. Some 74 percent of Republicans in the U.S. Senate now take that stance, as do 53 percent of GOP in the House."

No one on the left - or in the center - went before a Christian supremacist conference in March, as did Republican presidential contender Mike Huckabee, to praise David Barton, whom the Military Religious Freedom Foundation calls "King of the Liars for Jesus," with this:

"I almost wish that there would be, like, a simultaneous telecast, and all Americans would be forced - forced at gunpoint no less - to listen to every David Barton message, and I think our country would be better for it. I wish it'd happen."

Any national party in American history - except today's Republicans - would censure or even disown a Congressman like Paul Broun (R-GA) who called past presidents Wilson and FDR "communists" last month, or one who, like Joe Wilson (R-SC) would shout "You lie!" at a current president on the floor of the House. And those two are not anomalies. The party that won last November's election by promising fiscal reform and the creation of jobs (to solve the financial mess they took the lead in creating) is, now that it sits in the seats of Congressional and statehouse power, working diligently to deny women's reproductive freedom, halt the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, defund every social program with which they disagree, and to gut Medicare and even, Some Deity help us, Social Security.

Perhaps most egregiously, certainly most shamefully, only today's so-called "conservatives" (they're no such thing - see the next two articles), with the single exception of Mitt Romney, are pandering to the crazies who think the current president is the Manchurian candidate of a 50-year-long conspiracy to put a Kenyan-born Muslim socialist dictator in the White House. (What does it say about "conservatives" today when the sane one is a Mormon?)

There is no point in piling on further examples of the idiocy, scientific illiteracy, historical revisionism and outright mendacity that is driving right-wing politics in America today. But I have offered some here in the hope of

explaining why, while I will continue to try to limit—and balance—the coverage of politics in the pages of PIQUE, I will not stifle my, your, *our* demand for reason and truth.

**50 YEARS AFTER THE
“MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX” SPEECH:
WHAT A GENUINE CONSERVATIVE SOUNDS LIKE
Dwight David Eisenhower**

(Excerpted from delanceyplace.com March 16, 2011)

Three days before he departed the White House, Dwight Eisenhower gave a brief speech that has become regarded as one of our nation’s finest. In it he noted that after each war before World War II, America’s military had been significantly downsized if not effectively disbanded. After World War II this policy changed, and for the first time America had a vast army in place during a time of peace. While reminding citizens that there would always be crises, Eisenhower nonetheless expressed concern that this large military might exercise undue influence on U.S. policy, and further reminded the country that the military should be subject to the guidance of its citizenry.

Though he had faced Adolf Hitler, he voiced a profound preference for “the conference table” as opposed to “the certain agony of the battlefield,” and for “trust and respect” in preference to “fear and hate.” He lived out this preference as President by resisting involvement in wars in Egypt and beyond. He further expressed a concern about deficits, counseling that Americans “must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow.” Here are brief passages from this speech:

“Crises there will continue to be. In meeting them, whether foreign or domestic, great or small, there is a recurring temptation to feel that some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties. A huge increase in newer elements of our defense; development of unrealistic programs to cure every ill in agriculture; a dramatic expansion in basic and applied research – these and many other possibilities, each possibly promising in itself, may be suggested as the only way to the road we wish to travel.

“But each proposal must be weighed in the light of a broader consideration: the need to maintain balance in and among national programs; balance between the private and the public economy, balance between cost and hoped-for advantage; balance between the clearly necessary and the comfortably desirable; balance between our essential requirements as a nation and the duties imposed by the nation upon the individual; balance between actions of the moment and the national welfare of the future. Good judgment seeks balance and progress; lack of it eventually finds imbalance and frustration.

“The record of many decades stands as proof that our people and their government have, in the main, understood these truths and have responded to them well, in the face of stress and threat. But threats, new in kind or degree,

constantly arise. ...

“A vital element in keeping the peace is our military establishment. Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction.

“Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peacetime, or indeed by the fighting men of World War II or Korea.

“Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now we can no longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense; we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.

“This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

“In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

“We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together. ...

“Another factor in maintaining balance involves the element of time. As we peer into society’s future, we—you and I, and our government—must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow.

“Down the long lane of the history yet to be written America knows that this world of ours, ever growing smaller, must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.

“Such a confederation must be one of equals. The weakest must come to the conference table with the same confidence as do we, protected as we are by our moral, economic, and military strength. That table, though scarred

by many past frustrations, cannot be abandoned for the certain agony of the battlefield." – *January 17, 1961*

ANOTHER CONSERVATIVE, THE FIRST REPUBLICAN, ON "ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION"

(Excerpted from The Voice of Sanity, newsletter of the Upstate South Carolina Humanists, April, 2011)

In spite of the sharp recession there is still attention in federal and state legislative bodies about immigration. Much of it deals with securing borders from foreign terrorists, domestic terrorists re-entering the country, and illegal immigrants. ... But controversy over immigration also occurred during the 1840s and 50s.

During this time there were popular fears that the U.S. was being overwhelmed by German and Irish Catholic immigrants, and many people believed these immigrants were a threat to American Protestantism. The faction that tried to tighten immigration was originally called the American Republican Party (not related to our present Republican Party), then the American Party in 1855, and finally nicknamed the "Know Nothing" party because of suspicion that there was a secret organization among its members, who claimed to "know nothing" about it.

Abraham Lincoln was accused of being a "Know Nothing," and wrote a letter to Joshua Sneed, a well-known planter in Kentucky who was a slave owner. Evidently, the two kept up a correspondence even though they were at opposite ends of the spectrum as far as slavery was concerned. Here is Lincoln's response to the accusation in his letter. It is noteworthy that he worried about the slow erosion of human rights:

"How can anyone who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal except negroes." When the know nothings get control it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics." When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty – to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."

THE POWER OF BLOC VOTING IN NEW YORK

Paul Vitello

(Excerpted from "Some Rabbinical Students to Get State Tuition Aid" in The New York Times, March 30, 2011)

The state budget plan ... calls for 10 percent cuts in aid to public colleges and universities, but it would add about \$18 million a year in tuition assistance for students attending some private religious schools.

The added money would be available to any theological student who met a new set of criteria for the state's so-called Tuition Assistance Program grants. The major potential beneficiaries would be an estimated 5,000 men who attend

dozens of Orthodox rabbinical schools.

Assemblyman Dov Hikind, a Democrat whose Brooklyn district includes a large Orthodox population, called the additional financing "a matter of equity, to rectify the fact that New York State has denied rabbinical college students tuition assistance for all these years."

Mr. Hikind and other lawmakers have sought unsuccessfully for about 10 years to adopt the new criteria by amending the Tuition Assistance Program rules, eliminating a long-established ban on state tuition assistance for undergraduate students who attend religious schools, like yeshivas, that are not chartered by the state Board of Regents.

In negotiations this month, Republican leaders in the Senate asked that the new rules be included as part of the 2011-12 budget agreement. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Democratic leaders in the Assembly have agreed.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE OF UP AND DOWN

David A. Schroeder

(Excerpted from "Why Escalators Bring Out the Best In People," on scientificamerican.com, March 29, 2011)

Let's say you are trying to sell cookies for a school fundraiser at the local mall, and you want to pick the ideal spot to set up your table. ... A recent *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* article by Larry Sanna and his associates at the University of North Carolina suggests a surprising factor that you might want to consider – proximity to an escalator.

Building on research showing the power of metaphors to shape our thinking, Sanna and his colleagues noted that height is often used as a metaphor for virtue: moral high ground, God on high, looking up to good people, etc. If people were primed to think about height, they wondered, might people be more virtuous?

In a series of four different studies, the authors found consistent support for their predictions. They found that twice as many mall shoppers who had just ridden an *up* escalator contributed to the Salvation Army than shoppers who had just ridden the *down* escalator. In a second study, participants who had been taken *up* a short flight of stairs to an auditorium stage to complete a series of questionnaires volunteered more than 50 percent more of their time than participants who had been led *down* to the orchestra pit.

In a third study participants were to decide how much hot sauce to give a participant purportedly taking part in a food-tasting study. Those *up* on the stage gave only half as much of the painfully hot sauce to the other person as did those who were sitting *down* in the orchestra pit.

In a final study, participants watched film clips of scenes taken from an airplane above the clouds, or through the window of a passenger car. Participants who had watched the clip of flying *up* above the clouds were 50 percent more cooperative in a computer game than those who had watched the car ride *down* on the ground.

Overall these studies show remarkable consistency, linking height and different prosocial behaviors – i.e.,

donations, volunteering, compassion, and cooperation. While we may be inclined to think that our behaviors are the product of comprehensive thought processes, carefully weighing the pros and cons of alternatives, these results clearly show that this is not always the case. ...

More recently, researchers have recognized the roles played by dispositions. Personality factors may lead some people to be more prosocial than others: those who empathize with others and “feel their pain” may be more likely to get involved and offer help. Individuals with a sense of self-efficacy, a belief that they can accomplish whatever they set out to do, may also be more likely to help others.

What the present research adds is that unconscious processes may also be important in determining whether we will act to help others. Sanna’s work expands a multilevel perspective of prosocial behavior by recognizing that even the most subtle of situational cues (e.g., metaphorical devices that arouse relevant unconscious thought) may make people more helpful. Perhaps understanding the impact of these myriad factors more fully will help make our world a more helpful and cooperative place to live.

THE MODESTY MANIFESTO

David Brooks

(Excerpted from The New York Times, March 10, 2011)

We’re an overconfident species. Ninety-four percent of college professors believe they have above-average teaching skills. A survey of high school students found that 70 percent of them have above-average leadership skills and only 2 percent are below average.

Men tend to be especially blessed with self-esteem. Men are the victims of unintentional drowning more than twice as often as women. That’s because men have tremendous faith in their own swimming ability, especially after they’ve been drinking.

Americans are similarly endowed with self-esteem. When pollsters ask people around the world to rate themselves on a variety of traits, they find that people in Serbia, Chile, Israel and the United States generally supply the most positive views of themselves. People in South Korea, Switzerland, Japan, Taiwan and Morocco are on the humble side of the rankings.

Yet even from this high base, there is some evidence to suggest that Americans have taken self-approval up a notch over the past few decades. Start with the anecdotal evidence. It would have been unthinkable for a baseball player to celebrate himself in the batter’s box after a home-run swing. Now it’s not unusual. A few decades ago, pop singers didn’t compose anthems to their own prowess; now those songs dominate the charts. American students no longer perform particularly well in global math tests. But Americans are among the world leaders when it comes to thinking that we are really good at math.

Students in the Middle East, Africa and the U.S. have the greatest faith in their math skills. Students in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan have much less self-confidence, though they actually do better on the tests. ...

In short, there’s abundant evidence to suggest that we have shifted a bit from a culture that emphasized self-effacement — I’m no better than anybody else, but nobody is better than me — to a culture that emphasizes self-expansion. ...

Young people are bathed in messages telling them how special they are. Often these messages are untethered to evidence of actual merit. Over the past few decades, for example, the number of hours college students spend studying has steadily declined. Meanwhile, the average G.P.A. has steadily risen.

Some argue that today’s child-rearing and educational techniques have produced praise addicts. Roni Caryn Rabin of *The Times* recently reported on some research that found that college students would rather receive a compliment than eat their favorite food or have sex.

If Americans do, indeed, have a different and larger conception of the self than they did a few decades ago, I wonder if this is connected to some of the social and political problems we have observed over the past few years. I wonder if the rise of consumption and debt is in part influenced by people’s desire to adorn their lives with the things they feel befit their station. I wonder if the rise in partisanship is influenced in part by a narcissistic sense that, “I know how the country should be run and anybody who disagrees with me is just in the way.”

Most pervasively, I wonder if there is a link between a possible magnification of self and a declining saliency of the virtues associated with citizenship. Citizenship, after all, is built on an awareness that we are not all that special but are, instead, enmeshed in a common enterprise. Our lives are given meaning by the service we supply to the nation. ...

Perhaps the enlargement of the self has also attenuated the links between the generations. Every generation has an incentive to push costs of current spending onto future generations. But no generation has done it as freely as this one. Maybe people in the past had a visceral sense of themselves as a small piece of a larger chain across the centuries. As a result, it felt viscerally wrong to privilege the current generation over the future ones, in a way it no longer does.

It’s possible, in other words, that some of the current political problems are influenced by fundamental shifts in culture, involving things as fundamental as how we appraise ourselves. Addressing them would require a more comprehensive shift in values.

A BANKER’S PROGRESS

Gary Trudeau

(Transcribed from the cartoon, “Doonesbury,” April 3, 2011)

College graduate in cap and gown: “I hope to do something of value well and be fairly paid.”

Same man as shirtsleeved office worker: “I’d like to be paid for doing something of value fairly well.”

Now as junior executive: “I want to be valued and paid fairly well for doing something.”

As executive behind desk: “I deserve to be paid well for doing

something of no value.”

At head of conference table of cowed subordinates: “I demand to be paid obscenely well for destroying value.”

In cap and gown again as aged commencement speaker: “Always hold on to your values.”

EXPORTING DEMOCRACY HAS LED TO SHORTAGES OF IT IN THE U.S.

Andy Borowitz

(Excerpted from The Borowitz Report, April 14, 2011)

WASHINGTON: The U.S. policy of exporting democracy abroad has meant that there is very little of it left at home. That is the grim assessment of a new study commissioned by the University of Minnesota, which predicts that if the U.S. continues to export democracy at its current pace it may completely run out of it at home by the year 2015.

“We have been exporting democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq while there are severe shortages of it in Wisconsin and Florida,” said Professor Davis Logsdon, who supervised the study. “This is madness.”

Citing the study, Speaker of the House John Boehner said today, “It has been clear to me for some time that we must explore alternative forms of government, such as oligarchy or plutocracy.” Noting that democracy originated in Greece, Mr. Boehner added, “We must reduce our dependence on foreign sources of government.”

The Minnesota study contains several proposals, such as outsourcing the U.S. government to the world’s largest democracy, India. “The work done by Congress could be

accomplished much more efficiently by a series of electronic phone prompts,” the study recommends.

But Mr. Boehner warned that eliminating Congress entirely would have disastrous effects: “That would destroy entire sectors of our economy, especially the prostitution industry.”

Speaking from one of the states hardest hit by the democracy shortage, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker downplayed the seriousness of the problem, calling democracy “overrated.” “Teachers may teach our children that democracy is important,” he said, “but the solution is to get rid of the teachers.”

WHY WE (MOST OF US, ANYWAY) WATCH MSNBC

[It is] “the most anti-God network ever put on in the history of America.” -- *Glenn Beck*

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SCIENCE

On May 28, science will be 2597 years old. On that date in 585 BCE, Thales of Miletus predicted that a total solar eclipse would occur, and was spot-on right. Aristotle himself considered Thales, who rejected supernaturalism and contended that every observable effect has a physical cause, the father of science.

And in the 20th century Bertrand Russell pronounced that “Western philosophy begins with Thales.” Pretty good references.

How about a new holiday?

Science Day, May 28!

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humanist story**
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The end of the world!
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