

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February, 2012

Readers strike back! They're *not* undecided about belief in God or Santa Claus. We continue our argument about arguing with believers, and consider the dangers of religion to our "better angels" and of science to religion. We meet Muslims in Morocco with a young American, solve Israel's more-Jewish-than-thee problem, and make a list of the most important books we haven't read. Last month we considered "So what?" as an anti-theist philosophy; now it seems it's a movement. – JR

MOVE OVER, "NONES": HERE COME THE "SO WHATS?"

Cathy Lynn Grossman

(Excerpted from "For many, 'Losing My Religion' isn't just a song: It's life", in USA TODAY, 2012/01/03)

When Ben Helton signed up for an online dating service, under "religion" he called himself "spiritually apathetic". Sunday mornings, when Bill Dohm turns his eyes toward heaven, he's just checking the weather so he can fly his two-seater plane. Helton, 28, and Dohm, 54, aren't atheists, either. They simply shrug off God, religion, heaven or the ever-trendy search-for-meaning and/or purpose.

Their attitude could be summed up as "So what?"

"The real dirty little secret of religiosity in America is that there are so many people for whom spiritual interest, thinking about ultimate questions, is minimal," says Mark Silk, professor of religion and public life at Trinity College.

As Christmas Day glides by – all gilt, no substance – for many, clergy and religion experts are dismayed. They fear for souls' salvation and for the common threads of faith snapping in society. Others see no such dire consequences to a more openly secular America as people not only fess up to being faithless but admit they're skipping out on "spiritual", the cool default word of the decade, as well.

Only now, however, are they turning up in the statistical stream. Researchers have begun asking the kind of nuanced questions that reveal just how big the So What set might be:

- 44 percent told the 2011 Baylor University Religion Survey they spend no time seeking "eternal wisdom", and 19 percent said "it's useless to search for meaning".

- 46 percent told a 2011 survey by Nashville-based evangelical research agency, LifeWay Research, they never

wonder whether they will go to heaven.

- 28 percent told LifeWay "it's not a major priority in my life to find my deeper purpose". And 18 percent scoffed at the idea that God has a purpose or plan for everyone.

- 6.3 percent turned up on Pew Forum's 2007 Religious Landscape Survey as totally secular – unconnected to God or a higher power or any religious identity and willing to say religion is not important in their lives.

Hemant Mehta, who blogs as The Friendly Atheist, calls them the "apatheists".

Mariann Edgar Budde, Episcopal Bishop of Washington, D.C., calls them honest. "We live in a society today where it is acceptable now to say that they have no spiritual curiosity. At almost any other time in history, that would have been unacceptable." Budde finds this "very sad, because the whole purpose of faith is to be a source of guidance, strength and perspective in difficult times. To be human is to have a sense of purpose, an awareness that our life is an utterly unique expression of creation and we want to live it with meaning, grace and beauty."

Nah, Helton says. Helton only goes to the Catholic Church of his youth to hear his mother sing in the choir. His mind led him away. The more Helton read evolutionary psychology and neuro-psychology, he says, the more it seemed to him, "We might as well be cars. That, to me, makes more sense than believing what you can't see."

Ashley Gerst, in New York, shifts between "leaning to the atheist and leaning toward apathy. I would just like to see more people admit they don't believe. The only thing I'm pushy about is I don't want to be pushed. I don't want to change others and I don't want to debate my view."

Most So Whats are like Gerst, says David Kinnaman, author of *You Lost Me*, on young adults drifting away from church. They're uninterested in trying to talk a diverse set

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

SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / 212-308-2165 / 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.

of friends into a shared viewpoint in a culture that celebrates an idea that all truths are equally valid, he says. Personal experience, personal authority matter most. Hence scripture and tradition are quaint, irrelevant, artifacts. Instead of followers of Jesus, they're followers of 5,000 unseen "friends" on Facebook or Twitter.

"I think Jesus is getting lost in the data stream," says Kinnaman, president of the Christian research firm The Barna Group. "'Spiritual' is the hipster way of saying they're concerned with social injustice. But if you strip away the hipster factor, I'd estimate seven in 10 young adults would say they don't see much influence of God or religion in their lives at all."

This trend may have been leaving subtle tracks for years. The hot religion statistical trend of recent decades was the rise of the "Nones" – the people who checked "no religious identity" on the American Religious Identification Surveys (ARIS). The Nones numbers leapt from 8 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2008.

The So Whats appear to be a growing secular subset. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life's Landscape Survey dug in to the Nones to discover that nearly half said they believed "nothing in particular". . . .

The Rev. Ema Drouillard, who specializes in San Francisco-area non-denominational ceremonies, said in 2001 about 30 percent of her clients refused any reference to religion at their weddings. A decade later, 80 percent choose her carefully-God-free ceremony. The only faith they pledge is in each other. No higher authority is consulted as they vow to walk beside each other, "offering courage and hope through all your endeavors". Drouillard says, "A lot of people just aren't on any spiritual path. They say, 'We are just focusing on the party', or they have no language for their spirituality, so they just leave it out."

When church historian Diana Butler Bass researched her upcoming book, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, she found the So Whats are "a growing category".

Says Bass, "We can't underestimate the power of the collapse of institutional religion in the first 10 years of this century. It's freed so many people to say they don't really care. They don't miss rituals or traditions they may never have had anyway."

For them, the Almighty is off the radar, like some tiny foreign country they know exists but never think about.

DISORGANIZED RELIGION

Chris Ladd

(Excerpted from <http://blog.chron.com/goplifer/2011/12/disorganized-religion/>)

Anyone who has traveled in Europe may have experienced surprise at finding the pews of its beautiful, ancient churches occupied only by tourists. After World War II religion slipped to the periphery of public life. Europeans are commonly regarded as living in a "post-Christian" age, contrasted with the relative

religious enthusiasm of their American cousins. However, the thundering roar of American Bible-thumping may be drowning out the patter of footsteps leaving the pews. America may be trailing Europe, but it seems to be on the same path.

Travel a few minutes from downtown Houston ... and you'll find Lakewood Church [in a former basketball arena that holds 40,000], one of the flagships of the megachurch phenomenon in America. Churches like Lakewood might seem to represent America's immunity to the religious decline evident in Europe, but look carefully and you'll see a more complex story. Ask what denomination Lakewood belongs to and you'll get an interesting and increasingly typical answer – none. Lakewood was an entrepreneurial effort by "venture-pastor" John Osteen back in the '50s. His heirs own the enterprise. Scan the charismatic religious landscape in America and you'll see that pattern repeated over and over again.

Attendance figures make clear that churches in America are overall in steady decline, just a few decades behind Europe. The growth of fundamentalist congregations has not arrested the slide. They seem to act as the exit foyer of organized Christianity, swelling for a time as people leave. Even charismatic denominations like the Southern Baptists, which had benefited from earlier declines in mainline Protestantism, are beginning to see their numbers fall off.

What's emerging in the wake of this decline is a uniquely American brand of post-religious spirituality. The Big Round Church that is replacing America's Little White Churches incorporates Christian themes into an unapologetically consumer-oriented experience. The receding authority of a religious denomination is being replaced by the magnetism of a charismatic pastor, attracting a hardened remnant of fundamentalist believers unconcerned about the moral implications of commercialized faith. Organized Religion is giving way to Disorganized Religion.

Disorganized Religion is replacing traditional religious identities with a model in which the customer is always right. It drives an uncompromising line on popular, crowd-pleasing propositions – fiercely condemning broadly unpopular things that "other people" do. Claiming to embrace strictly literal Biblical interpretations, these congregations often take a literalist approach on homosexual rights, abortion, and the notion that only born-again Christianity can offer a path to truth. On the other hand, they employ subtle, almost tortured scriptural contortions to avoid being stuck with the less commercially viable byproducts of literalism.

Women, who make up half the market after all, aren't required to "remain silent" as the Apostle Paul explicitly demands. Instead they are popular television preachers and authors. Old Testament admonitions, which are perfectly useful to support a hard line on gay rights, are toned down where they require the optically unpleasant stoning of disobedient children and blasphemers.

Divorce gets a carefully nuanced treatment, since a literal line on that subject would be market suicide. The Bible's disappointing failure to make any mention of the

vital issue of abortion is overlooked entirely. And Jesus' unreasonable demand that his followers give up their worldly possessions to pursue a life of service is, well, rendered a bit more reasonable. ...

The steady move toward disorganization is a fully global phenomenon. In countries less prepared for the experience like Pakistan and Afghanistan it poses an existential threat, while Europe and Canada have walked through it with barely a whisper. The process of religious devolution creates anxiety for many, anxiety that's often displayed in the shape of fanatical extremism and desperate efforts to shore up a disintegrating religious culture by political mandate. We are not immune.

America seems unlikely to suffer as much pain as the Middle Eastern countries, but it seems unwilling to give up that old time religion as gracefully as the Europeans. One day the dominant branches of Christianity in America may be as philosophical in outlook as the bulk of Western Judaism. The mainline Protestant denominations are, for the most part, already on their way. Catholicism may not be far behind. ...

Religion isn't going away. It seems to be wired into the fabric of our minds. In the absence of some organized form we'll construct it out of whatever spare parts we can find. Just spend some time with radical environmentalists to witness a demonstration.

Regardless of what else happens to our culture, Christians will likely for the foreseeable future continue to gather to discuss the meaning of their faith and build our communities. They still do this in Europe, though on a much smaller scale than in the past. A mature disorganized Christianity might grow less enthralled by the fantastic while still remaining a significant cultural force. We'll see.

Perhaps one day tourists will quietly marvel at the architectural splendor of our great glass megachurches while token services are carried on in the background. They'll make much better site-seeing stops than European cathedrals since they are already equipped with coffee houses, restaurants, and book stores.

Be sure to stop by the gift shop on the way out.

DOES SCIENCE MAKE BELIEF IN GOD OBSOLETE? NO, BUT IT SHOULD.

Christopher Hitchens

(Reprinted on ESkeptic, 2011/01/04, from Hitchens' Templeton Foundation essay, edited by Michael Shermer.)

U ntil about 1832, when it first seems to have become established as a noun and a concept, the term "scientist" had no really independent meaning. "Science" meant "knowledge" in much the same way as "physic" meant medicine, and those who conducted experiments or organized field expeditions or managed laboratories were known as "natural philosophers". To these gentlemen (for they were mainly gentlemen) the belief in a divine presence or inspiration was often merely assumed to be a part of the natural order, in rather the same way as

it was assumed—or actually insisted upon—that a teacher at Cambridge University swear an oath to be an ordained Christian minister. For Sir Isaac Newton—an enthusiastic alchemist, a despiser of the doctrine of the Trinity, and a fanatical anti-Papist—the main clues to the cosmos were to be found in Scripture. Joseph Priestley, discoverer of oxygen, was a devout Unitarian as well as a believer in the phlogiston theory. Alfred Russel Wallace, to whom we owe much of what we know about biogeography and natural selection, delighted in nothing more than a session of ectoplasmic or spiritual communion with the departed.

And thus it could be argued—though if I were a believer in god I would not myself attempt to argue it—that a commitment to science by no means contradicts a belief in the supernatural. The best known statement of this opinion in our own time comes from the late Stephen Jay Gould, who tactfully proposed that the worlds of science and religion commanded "non-overlapping magisteria". How true is this on a second look, or even on a first glance? Would we have adopted monotheism in the first place if we had known:

1. That our species is at most 200,000 years old, and very nearly joined the 98.9 percent of all other species on our planet by becoming extinct, in Africa, 60,000 years ago, when our numbers seemingly fell below 2,000 before we embarked on our true "exodus" from the savannah?

2. That the universe, originally discovered by Edwin Hubble to be expanding away from itself in a flash of red light, is now known to be expanding away from itself even more rapidly, so that soon even the evidence of the original "big bang" will be unobservable?

3. That the Andromeda galaxy is on a direct collision course with our own, the ominous but beautiful premonition of which can already be seen with a naked eye in the night sky?

These are very recent examples, post-Darwinian and post-Einsteinian, and they make pathetic nonsense of any idea that our presence on this planet, let alone in this of so many billion galaxies, is part of a plan. Which design, or designer, made so sure that absolutely nothing (see above) will come out of our fragile current "something"? What plan, or planner, determined that millions of humans would die without even a grave-marker, for our first 200,000 years of struggling and desperate existence, and that there would only then at last be a "revelation" to save us, about 3,000 years ago, but disclosed only to gaping peasants in remote and violent and illiterate areas of the Middle East?

To say that there is little "scientific" evidence for the last proposition is to invite a laugh. There is no evidence for it, period. And if by some strenuous and improbable revelation there was to be any evidence, it would only argue that the creator or designer of all things was either (a) very laborious, roundabout, tinkering, and incompetent and/or (b) extremely capricious and callous, and even cruel. It will not do to say, in reply to this, that the lord moves in mysterious ways. Those who dare to claim to be his understudies and votaries and interpreters must either

WHY IT'S SO TRICKY FOR ATHEISTS TO DEBATE WITH BELIEVERS – PART 2

Greta Christina

(Reprinted from *AlterNet*, 2010/01/16. Part 1 of this essay appeared in *January PIQUE*)

accept the cruelty and the chaos or disown it: they cannot pick and choose between the warmly benign and the frigidly indifferent. Nor can the religious claim to be in possession of secret sources of information that are denied to the rest of us. That claim was, once, the prerogative of the Pope and the witch-doctor, but now it's gone. This is as much as to say that reason and logic reject god, which (without being conclusive) would be a fairly close approach to a scientific rebuttal. It would also be quite near to saying something that lies just outside the scope of this essay, which is that morality shudders at the idea of god, as well.

Religion, remember, is theism not deism. Faith cannot rest itself on the argument that there might or might not be a prime mover. Faith must believe in answered prayers, divinely-ordained morality, heavenly warrant for circumcision, the occurrence of miracles, or what you will. Physics and chemistry and biology and palaeontology and archaeology have, at a minimum, given us explanations for what used to be mysterious, and furnished us with hypotheses that are at least as good as, or very much better than, the ones offered by any believers in other and inexplicable dimensions.

Does this mean that the inexplicable or superstitious has become "obsolete"? I myself would wish to say no, if only because I believe that the human capacity for wonder neither will nor should be destroyed or superseded. But the original problem with religion is that it is our first, and our worst, attempt at explanation. It is how we came up with answers before we had any evidence. It belongs to the terrified childhood of our species, before we knew about germs or could account for earthquakes. It belongs to our childhood, too, in the less charming sense of demanding a tyrannical authority: a protective parent who demands compulsory love even as he exacts a tithe of fear. This unalterable and eternal despot is the origin of totalitarianism, and represents the first cringing human attempt to refer all difficult questions to the smoking and forbidding altar of a Big Brother. This of course is why one desires that science and humanism would make faith obsolete, even as one sadly realizes that as long as we remain insecure primates we shall remain very fearful of breaking the chain.

CALVIN EXPLAINS ASTROLOGY AND RESPONSIBILITY TO HOBBS

(Sadly, *Bill Watterson* retired the comic strip in 1995, but the narcissist philosophy of six-year-old Calvin, and the sardonic pragmatism of his toy stuffed-tiger Hobbes (who is a real tiger in Calvin's imagination) is forever fresh for devoted junkies like this editor. – JR)

Calvin: Do you believe our destinies are determined by the stars?

Hobbes: Nah.

Calvin: Oh, I do.

Hobbes: Really? How come?

Calvin: Life's a lot more fun when you're not responsible for your actions.

In conversations between atheists and believers, is there any way atheists can win? ... Believers put atheists in no-win situations, so that no matter what atheists do, we'll be seen as either acting like jerks or conceding defeat. Like so many rhetorical gambits aimed at atheists, these "damned if you do, damned if you don't" tactics aren't really valid criticisms of atheism. [Rhetorical tactics like ...]

As long as we don't know exactly how organic life began from non-life, then atheists' conclusion that life almost certainly began as physical cause and effect will be called blind faith in materialism. But if we can replicate abiogenesis (the origins of life from non-life) in the laboratory – something that's expected to happen in the next few years – this will be seen as proof that life had to be intentionally created. After all, it required people working in a lab for decades to make it happen!

Why this is untrue and unfair: This one drives me up a tree. The conclusion that life almost certainly began as a chemical process is not blind faith. It's a reasonable conclusion based on the evidence. The overwhelming body of evidence supports the conclusion that life is a physical, biochemical process, developed into its current state of complexity and diversity by the natural process of evolution. It is reasonable to conclude that this phenomenon began as a physical, proto-biochemical process.

And when/if abiogenesis does get replicated in the lab, that's hardly proof that life had to be designed. I'm sorry, but that's just silly. Natural processes get replicated in the lab all the time. We grow mold in Petri dishes – does that mean mold can't occur naturally?

If atheists don't offer specific arguments and evidence supporting atheism, we are told, 'See? Atheism is just as much a matter of faith as religion.' But when we do provide evidence and arguments for our position, we are accused of proselytizing.

Why this is untrue and unfair: Sometimes when atheists write about atheism, we take God's non-existence as a given. Like pretty much everyone else in the world, we don't always want to discuss first principles; we sometimes want to move on to other topics, such as movement strategy, or the dissemination of critical thinking skills, or who's the sexiest atheist.

We've made the "God doesn't exist" argument elsewhere, and we don't want to recap it every single time. That doesn't make atheism an article of faith. It makes it a conclusion that we've reached and are moving on from. (If you really want to know what our evidence and our arguments are for our non-belief, we can usually point you toward something.)

As for the accusation that we're proselytizing, all too often, the word "proselytizing" gets tossed around when

what's really meant is, "attempted persuasion by people I don't agree with." Persuasion is not proselytizing. And if you insist that it is, you'll have a hard time explaining what's so bad about it.

Religion is a hypothesis about the world: the hypothesis that things are the way they are, at least in part, because of supernatural entities or forces acting on the natural world. And there's no good reason to treat it any differently from any other hypothesis. Which includes pointing out its flaws and inconsistencies, asking its adherents to back it up with solid evidence, making jokes about it when it's just being silly, offering arguments and evidence for our own competing hypotheses, and trying to persuade people out of it if we think it's mistaken. It's persuasion. It's the marketplace of ideas. Why should religion get a free ride?

If atheists admit they can't be 100 percent certain of God's non-existence, believers pounce on that fragment of uncertainty, and atheism is accused of being as much a matter of faith as religion. But if atheists insist they are 100 percent certain that God does not exist (or as close to 100 percent certain as anyone can be), then believers pounce on that certainty ... and atheism is accused of being as much a matter of faith as religion.

Why this is untrue and unfair: This is one of my pet peeves. It's just so transparently unfair. We don't apply the "absolute 100 percent certainty" standard to any other type of conclusion. If we conclude that the cat is somewhere in the house even though we can't see it, or that there isn't a pink pony behind our sofa that teleports to Guam the minute we look back there, or that the earth is orbiting the sun, nobody insists that these conclusions are articles of faith just because there's an infinitesimal hypothetical possibility we might be wrong. These are seen as reasonable conclusions, based on the available evidence.

So when atheists say, "No, I'm not 100 percent sure that there is no God, there's almost nothing that we can be 100 percent sure of—but so what, we can still make reasonable conclusions about what's probable and plausible based on the available evidence, and all the evidence we have now points to God not existing, so I feel confident in rejecting the God hypothesis unless I see better evidence", that doesn't make our atheism an article of faith.

And when other atheists say, "Yes, I'm 100 percent sure that there is no God: the fragment of hypothetical possibility that God exists is so insignificant that it's not even worth considering, I'm 100 percent certain that there are no leprechauns or unicorns—or as close to 100 percent as anyone could reasonably expect—and I see no reason to treat God any differently", then again, that doesn't make their atheism an article of faith.

The only thing that would make atheism a true article of faith would be if atheists said, "Nothing you could possibly say, nothing I could possibly see or experience, no evidence you could possibly provide me, could ever convince me that my atheism was wrong. My belief in the non-existence of God is an a priori assumption; it is unshakable, as constant as the Northern Star." And I have yet to encounter an atheist

who says that. Finally—and maybe most crucially of all: *When we speak out in any way about our atheism—and when we continue to organize, and to make ourselves and our ideas more visible and vocal, and to generally turn ourselves into a serious movement for social change—we are accused of being hostile, fanatical, rude, evangelical, bigoted, and extremist.*

But if we don't speak out, if we don't organize, if we don't forge ourselves into a powerful and visible movement, then the bigotry and misinformation and discrimination against us will continue unabated.

Why this is untrue and unfair: We really can't win on this one. Even the most mild forms of atheist activism and visibility result in believers accusing us of disrespect, intolerance and forcing our beliefs on others. If we do something as mild and unthreatening as putting up bus ads saying, "You can be good without God" or "Don't believe in God? You are not alone", you can bet good money that plenty of believers will get worked up about how those terrible atheists are insulting Christians and other believers. The purest act of visibility—the simple act of standing up and saying out loud, "Atheists exist and are good people"—is treated as another example of the offensive, dogmatic, in-your-face extremism of the atheist movement.

But here's the skinny: There has never once been a marginalized group that has won recognition and rights by sitting back and waiting politely for it to happen. There has never once been a marginalized group that has won recognition and rights by doing anything other than speaking out, organizing, making itself visible and vocal. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

So you'll have to forgive us if we take the accusations of our offensive, dogmatic, in-your-face extremism with something of a grain of salt. You'll have to forgive us if we listen to the concerned advice from believers about how our confrontational tactics are alienating people and we need to dial it back. And respond by giving it the horse laugh, and continuing to do what we've so successfully been doing. You'll have to forgive us if we treat the attempts to quiet us down as attempts to shut us up.

If you have a valid critique of a particular atheist or atheist idea, by all means, speak up. And if you have what you think is a valid critique of the atheist movement as a whole, we'd be interested to hear about it. We're not perfect, and we don't claim to be.

But please make sure your criticisms are fair. Please make sure your criticisms don't just put us into a rhetorical box, where we can't win no matter what we do. Please make sure your criticisms are a genuine attempt to engage with atheists and the atheist movement, and not just an attempt to stop the conversation and make us go away.

If there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life, and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life.

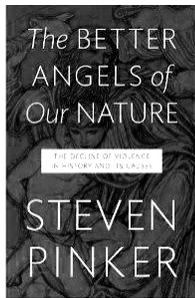
— Albert Camus

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - MARCH 2012

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURSDAY, FEB 2, 6:30 pm
in the Gallery room of
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK
28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)
(3 doors West of the church - red door)
We'll discuss
THE BETTER ANGELS
OF OUR NATURE: Why Violence has Declined - Part 1
(Sections 1-4)

by Steven Pinker

Part One of *three* Book Club meetings devoted to this outstanding new history, an exploration of the essence of human nature, mixing psychology and history to provide a remarkable picture of an increasingly nonviolent world. The key, Pinker explains, is to understand our intrinsic motives – the inner demons that incline us toward violence and the better angels that steer us away – and how changing circumstances have allowed our better angels to prevail, exploding fatalist myths about humankind's inherent violence and the curse of modernity.



For Feb, read Part 1 - Sections 1-4.

Kindle edition available.

Read an excerpt: Page 8.

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.

The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

Part 2 of our discussion:
Sections 5-7
THURS, MARCH 1, 6:30 pm
Part 3, Sections 8-10
THURS, APRIL 5, 6:30 pm

MONDAY, FEB 13, 7:00 pm
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
"SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE"

Our Valentine's Day celebration! Young Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) is forced to stage his latest comedy, "Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter", before it's even written. When a lovely noblewoman (Gwyneth Paltrow) auditions for a role, they fall into forbidden love – and his play finds a new life (and title). The comedy transforms into a bitter-sweet romance that won seven Oscars, including 1998's Best Picture and Best Actress. Best line? "That woman is a woman!"



SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

Check out the menu and prices at www.stonecreeknyc.com

BRUNCH!
SUNDAY, FEB 19, 12 NOON
Gather for our
MONTHLY CASUAL 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/

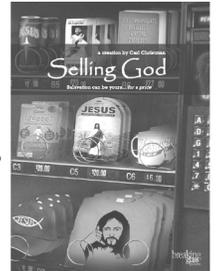
Everyone interested in getting together with 15-20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good grub (huge selection of beers!) and lively talk in a charming East-side setting is welcome.

Bring friends!

GREAT LECTURES
TUESDAY, FEB 28, 7:00 pm
"SELLING GOD"
(Part 1)

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

Salvation is yours – for a price. This 2009 documentary – which we'll watch in two parts in February and March – combines black comedy and serious historical research to examine how the marketing of fundamentalist Christianity has evolved over the years, including the advent of televangelism, the new super-duper megachurches, and the religious right's post-September-11 battle for moral superiority and money.



Part 2: March 27.

Great Lectures Night is FREE

PLANNING AHEAD
Holidays and disasters aside, the *usual* monthly schedule of SHSNY events is:
Book Club: First Thursday at the Community Church of NY
Movie Night: Second Monday at Stone Creek Lounge.
Brunch: Third Sunday at BXL East Bistro.
Great Lectures: Fourth Tuesday at Stone Creek Lounge.
More info: www.shsnyc.org and at humanism.meetup.com/515;reasonablenewyork.org/ and 212-308-2165

YES, SHSNY WILL JOIN
REASON RALLY
IN WASHINGTON, D.C.,
MARCH 24!
COME! DETAILS TBA.

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - MARCH 2012

SUNDAY, FEB 12, 2:00 pm
CENTER FOR INQUIRY-NYC
& NYC SKEPTICS

present
**“DARWIN DAY, 2012:
THE EVOLUTION OF
ALTRUISM AND SOCIAL
INTELLIGENCE”**
NYU Kimmel Center
60 Washington Square

What can the decision-making skills of monkeys tell us about our own tendencies? How do chimps and human toddlers decide when and how to help others? Just how “smart” and “nice” are our closest relatives? And how did their evolution impact human development?

This panel discussion about altruism, decision making, and the evolution of human cognition will feature prominent psychologists Laurie Santos, director of the Comparative Cognition Laboratory at Yale, and Felix Warneken, of Harvard, and will be moderated by Massimo Pigliucci, evolutionary biologist-turned-philosopher at the City University of New York.

Admission is free!

Info: centerforinquiry.net/nyc

WEDNESDAY, FEB 1, 6-8 pm
**Fordham Center on Religion
and Culture**

**WHAT RULES AMERICA:
MONEY, MORALS OR MYTH?**
Pope Auditorium
113 West 60 St.

“A Three-Way Debate” between Robert Kuttner (money), Robert A. George (moral commitment), and Susan Jacoby (shared myths), moderated by E.J. Dionne, Jr..

Admission is free!

Info: fordham.edu/ReligCulture

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2012, 7:00 p.m.

**Our 4th Annual
SHSNY ANNIVERSARY & DARWIN DAY BANQUET**
Golden Unicorn Restaurant
18 East Broadway
(in the heart of Chinatown)

Come gather at “one of NYC’s 5 Best” Chinese restaurants to celebrate the 203rd birthday of Charles Darwin (February 12, 1809) and the 24th Anniversary of the birth (January 14, 1988) of SHSNY.

Highlights of the evening:

10-COURSE CHINESE BANQUET

... including Peking Duck, Stir-Fried Lobster, Filet Steak with Chinese Broccoli, Stir-Fried Peach & Chicken, Winter Melon Seafood Soup, several veggie choices, plus Shrimp Dumplings, Crispy Spring Rolls, Singapore Mai Fun, and desserts, of course. Preview it all (and get directions) at www.goldenunicornrestaurant.com

PRESENTATION OF THE SHSNY 2011 DUMBTH AWARD

Who will win the not-so-coveted horse’s-ass award? Banquet attendees will get a chance to vote a second time for the idiot of their choice. (To vote now for the first time, see page 5.)

Special Guest Star: GEORGE HRAB

Internationally-acclaimed musician/composer and wildly funny performer of such humanist/rationalist/skeptic songs as God Is Not Great, Heaven Must Be Boring, Ms. Information, Everything Alive Will Die Someday, and Think For Yourself, George will literally make our evening sing!

With six solo albums to his credit, and a weekly “Geologic Podcast” with a worldwide following, George is one of today’s most active and successful independent musicians/performers. Preview our guest star on Google and YouTube, and don’t miss what will be an exciting, thought-provoking, and very, very funny performance.



Book now for the most important – and most fun – meeting of the year!

Cost for the evening, all-inclusive: \$50 per person.

Cash bar.

PRE-PAYMENT IS A MUST!

Pre-pay at www.shsny.org. Use your PayPal account or your credit card.

Or mail your check, made out to “SHSNY,” to:

SHSNY, PO Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-7661.

Questions? Call 212-308-2165, and leave a call-back number.

An excerpt from our Book Club selection - see page 6.
HAS RELIGION MADE THE WORLD LESS SAFE?

Steven Pinker

(Reprinted from the Washington Post "On Faith" column, 2011/12/27. This essay is adapted from The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined, the SHSNY Book Club selection for February, March, and April).

The Bible depicts a world that, seen through modern eyes, is staggering in its savagery. People enslave, rape, and murder members of their immediate families. Warlords slaughter civilians indiscriminately, including the children. Women are bought, sold, and plundered like sex toys. The world of the New Testament is little better: kings carry out mass infanticide; thieves and activists are punished by being nailed to a cross.

Though most of the events narrated in the Bible almost certainly never happened, historians agree that they reflect the norms and practices of the era. We live in a world that is indisputably less violent than that of our ancestors. Savage practices such as human sacrifice, chattel slavery, blood sports, debtors' prisons, frivolous executions, religious persecution, and punitive torture and mutilation have been eliminated from most of the world. Less obviously, homicide rates have plummeted over the centuries, and during the past sixty-five years the rate of death from war has fallen to historically unprecedented lows.

Having documented these declines of violence, I am often asked what role religion has played in this historical progress. Overall it has not been a good one. Many humanitarian reforms, such as the elimination of cruel punishment, the dissemination of empathy-inducing novels, and the abolition of slavery, were met with fierce opposition in their time by church authorities. The conviction that one's own values are sacred and those of everyone else heretical inflamed the combatants in the European Wars of Religion, the second-bloodiest period in modern Western history, and it continues to inflame partisans in the Middle East and parts of the Islamic world today.

Defenders of religion as a pacifying force often claim that the two genocidal ideologies of the 20th century, fascism and communism, were atheistic. But the first claim is mistaken and the second irrelevant. Fascism happily coexisted with Catholicism in Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Croatia, and though Hitler had little use for Christianity, he was by no means an atheist, and professed that he was carrying out a divine plan. Historians have documented that many of the Nazi elite melded Nazism with German Christianity in a syncretic faith, drawing on its millennial visions and its long history of anti-Semitism.

As for godless communism, godless it certainly was. But the repudiation of one illiberal ideology does not automatically grant immunity from others. Marxism violently rejected the humanism and liberalism of the Enlightenment, which placed the flourishing of individuals as the ultimate goal of political systems.

At the same time, particular religious movements at

particular times in history have worked against violence. In zones of anarchy, religious institutions have sometimes served as a civilizing force, and since many of them claim to hold the morality franchise in their communities, they can be staging grounds for reflection and moral action. The Quakers parlayed Enlightenment arguments against slavery and war into effective movements for abolition and pacifism, and in the 19th century other liberal Protestant denominations joined them. Protestant churches also helped to tame the wild frontier of the American South and West. African-American churches supplied organizational infrastructure and rhetorical power to the civil rights movement (though Martin Luther King rejected mainstream Christian theology and drew his inspiration from Gandhi, secular Western philosophy, and renegade humanistic theologians). In the developing world, Desmond Tutu and other church leaders worked with politicians and nongovernmental organizations in the reconciliation movements that healed countries following apartheid and civil unrest.

So the subtitle of the late Christopher Hitchens's atheist bestseller, *How religion poisons everything*, is an overstatement. Religion plays no single role in the history of violence because religion has not been a single force in the history of anything. The vast set of movements we call religions have little in common but their distinctness from the secular institutions that are recent appearances on the human stage. And the beliefs and practices of religions, despite their claims to divine provenance, are strongly influenced by human affairs, responding to its intellectual and social currents. When the currents move in enlightened directions, religions often adapt to them, most obviously in the discreet neglect of the bloodthirsty passages of the Old Testament. Many accommodations instigated by breakaway denominations, reform movements, ecumenical councils, and other liberalizing forces have allowed other religions to be swept along by the humanistic tide. It is when fundamentalist forces stand athwart those currents and impose tribal, authoritarian, and puritanical constraints that religion becomes a force for violence.

THE TRUTH ABOUT "THE TRUTH ABOUT SANTA"
Harvey Wachtel

I'm sure I'm not the only reader disagreeing with Walter Balcerak ("The Truth About Santa", PIQUE, January), especially his appalling conclusion that "there is no point in challenging irrational beliefs that are emotionally rewarding". No point? His daughter changed her beliefs and moved on to more grown-up forms of satisfaction after he told her the truth about Santa, didn't she? We may not be "like gods" to our adult friends and acquaintances, but adding our voice to the scales on the side of truth may be part of what's needed to help people "change their thinking ... on their own initiative".

As to the pleasures of which we may be depriving the believer, I'll let George Bernard Shaw say it: "The happiness of credulity is a cheap and dangerous quality." Helping people of any age to grow up is nothing to be ashamed of.

NO LAURA, THERE IS NO SANTA CLAUS

Giddian Beer

In reply to Walter Balcerak's "The Truth About Santa" (PIQUE, January), many people believe that childhood is a sweet something to be prolonged as long as possible. Others, me included, believe it should be preparation for adulthood. This can be done in a gentle, cheerful way, without filling their heads with nonsense or "protecting" them from knowledge that they will need sooner rather than later. That way worked quite well with my kids.

Though delusions are not necessary for happiness any more than drugs and alcohol, people grow dependent on them and protective of them.

But many delusions, not only the silliest ones, are not protectable. Eventually reality overwhelms. Then delusion is replaced by disillusionment and resentment. I suspect that if Mr. Balcerak had told his daughter Laura the truth about Santa—that he is a fun thing like The Cat in the Hat—in a jocular way, when she was two or three instead of waiting until she was seven, there would be no resentment today because nothing would have been "stolen" from her.

Belief in one or more fantasies makes people susceptible to fantasies in general. And susceptibility to fantasy facilitates exploitation by political henchmen, demagogues, charlatans, and holy men. Then the exploited strive to inflict these fantasies on all of us, with painful, often horrible results. I agree that trying to convert the deeply committed is usually futile, but there are many, many out there, a majority I think, who are open to reason. These are the people to whom we speak.

Surely, to have a world with less stupidity and less evil, we need more critical thinking and healthy skepticism, less gullibility, less faith.

PEEK-A-BOO, GOD. WE DON'T SEE YOU.

Remo Cosentino

Eric Weiner's article, "America Undecided about God?" (January PIQUE, reprinted from *The New York Times*) performs a metaphysical magical act: he causes something to disappear and then reappear. That lost-and-found item is God.

Weiner argues that the Nones, "the nation's fastest growing number of Americans", are not running away from God but from organized religion. That the problem is not God, but the religions that have co-opted Him, and the unease with which we perceive God and His role in our lives. His absence in our lives is the result of the confused state of religion and the political polarization in the country that posits an angry and unjust God. Weiner then attempts to conjure God back into our lives with a little help from "the sort of entrepreneurial spirit that has long defined America, including religious America". What is needed, he breathlessly counsels, is "a Steve Jobs of religion ... not a new religion but, rather a way of being religious". This new way "would be straightforward and unencumbered and absolutely intuitive ... and highly interactive". The result would be a "religious operating system for the Nones

among us. And for all of us."

Apart from the huckster vocabulary Weiner employs to sell a contemporary version of *The Good News*, his magic trick is finally exposed. God has not disappeared for Weiner or the Nones who believe as he does; He was behind the shroud all the time. Weiner not only makes God reappear again – dressed in different garb, but housed in a new religious edifice that will "allow one to utter the word 'God' without embarrassment". Hallelujah!

If Weiner were sincerely searching, as a None, for genuine spiritual connection to life, his fellow man, and to the rational grounding of the Enlightenment, he needn't have looked further than a group of Nones that seek truth – secular humanists. The error that many Nones and Weiner make is their belief that a sense of the "spiritual" or awe at the plenitude and magnitude of life on earth can only be explained or experienced in religious terms. Weiner needn't have tortured himself searching for an insubstantial and quixotic God in a new form. The beliefs he defined as "straightforward and unencumbered and absolutely intuitive" are easily discovered in secular humanism. To quote our own SHSNY brochure:

We believe that all people can lead rational, moral, meaningful and happy lives without religion. ... We believe in the same virtues as the truly religious – honesty, fair dealing, respect for others, and helping the poor and the afflicted. But we reject religion's so-called "virtues" of poverty, celibacy, and blind, unquestioning faith.

The "operating system" for Nones exists. No new religious edifice needed, Mr. Weiner.

WISHY-WASHIER THAN THOU

Roy Speckhardt

(Reprinted from *patheos.com*, 2011/12/20, and *Humanist News*, 2012/01/12)

Eric Weiner's recent wishy-washer-than-thou *New York Times* article, "Americans: Undecided About God?" [and reprinted in January PIQUE], presents a curious new bias to decipher when it comes to religion and nonbelievers.

Weiner walks in well-worn shoes when he tries to tackle a cultural issue by opening with a complaint and offering a possibly better path. He says we are terrible when it comes to talking about god and asks for a new "religious operating system". But he's sadly lacking in clarity and hopelessly striving for impossibility.

We don't really know where Weiner stands, as the title aptly states he is undecided about God. He may not be alone in this position, but he significantly exaggerates how much company he has in the United States when he implies most of the "Nones" are with him. Nones are people who simply answer "none" when asked for religious affiliation, and that doesn't indicate that they are undecided about whether or not they believe in a god.

Weiner counts himself among this None group, but tries to separate it from nonbelievers, claiming that "we Nones may not believe in God, but we hope to one day".

As enigmatic as it is to hope to believe in something you don't, he also misunderstands a widely quoted study when he claims that only 7 percent of Nones are atheists. What Weiner and so many others fail to recognize is that there are many terms Nones use to describe themselves, including atheist, humanist, freethinker, skeptic, non-theist, nonbeliever, secular, and agnostic, to name the most common. Additionally, according to the 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey done by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, there are millions of Americans who actually identify with a particular religion for cultural, familial, or community reasons but remain nonbelievers. Most Nones and many of those who are religiously labeled don't hold a belief in a traditional god, so to claim that atheists are a tiny minority, or to assume that they have an unfulfilled desire to become a believer is simply not true.

Weiner tries to make the case that there would be fewer Nones if only politics would release its hold on religion, implying that Nones exist because politics and religion have become too closely intertwined. While this unfortunate entanglement between church and state is real, the insistence that Nones would jump at the chance to join a religion if politics would disappear from the picture is a false assertion that prejudicially assumes that nonbelievers aren't sincere in their convictions. Millions of nonbelievers have spent years reading, discussing, and thinking about the religions of our culture, and have specifically decided that their explanations just don't make sense.

In seeking a solution to the so-called Angry Atheist/True Believer dichotomy Weiner uses, he seems to want a social framework that will maintain religiosity while still supporting doubt. That may be nice in theory, but doubt is not something religions are built to embrace. Religion replaces doubt with faith; the acceptance of doctrine, often even in the light of contradictory evidence. Faith isn't possible for those who doubt, experiment, and accept the facts presented when religious claims are honestly tested. Weiner is therefore asking for the impossible when he challenges us to imagine a forum where faith and doubt co-exist harmoniously.

It's obvious that Weiner is conflicted. Perhaps driven by a laudable desire to achieve harmony, he is trying to find a way to hold on to supernaturalism in a purely natural world, but there simply is no "religious space that celebrates doubt, encourages experimentation and allows one to utter the word God without embarrassment". Such ideas are mutually exclusive. The "new way of being religious" that Weiner is seeking is understandable, given the complaints and observations that cause his inner conflicts. He could certainly try to create something that is "straightforward and unencumbered and absolutely intuitive", but it wouldn't be a religion. It would be exactly the opposite.

Roy Speckhardt is the Executive Director of the American Humanist Association.

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. – Aristotle

IN MOROCCO: A YOUNG AMERICAN (ATHEIST) WOMAN AMONG THE MUSLIMS

Hilary Brashear

Editor's note: The following is excerpted from a letter by the 21-year-old college-student daughter of an SHSNY family. – JR

Iwanted to share with you my thoughts about the five-day trip to Morocco my program in Spain organized. It was a truly eye opening experience and I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity to go there.

As a non-religious, atheist, feminist, it was both challenging and fascinating to be in a culture with very set, unequal gender roles and in one that is so unquestioning of religion. In the first conversation we had with some students in Tangier I asked if they felt like there was a rise of secularism or non-religious identification in Morocco. The girl who responded didn't seem to understand "secularism", answered as though I had asked about the spectrum of religiousness, and talked about "good" Muslims and "bad" Muslims. I then rephrased the question, asking how many non-Muslims there were in Morocco (very few). This was indicative of most of the conversations we had, in which it was obvious that religion completely influences almost every aspect of life. Islam and a belief in God is so taken for granted that at times it felt difficult to talk to some students because I didn't know how to argue with them when we think so fundamentally differently.

When we were walking around with Moroccan students in Rabat I had an interesting conversation with a guy who is studying psychology and cultural studies. He told me that what he wants to do with his life is to help people; he is currently volunteering at an orphanage. He also raps, and we talked a little bit about political rap and rap as poetry. He said he was friends with Christians and "even atheists", and felt it was important to try to understand people with different beliefs and to read and learn as many languages as he could. He talked about the "real Islam" which, as the Koran says, should be based on peace, understanding, and equality. I asked him if the Koran says that men and women are equal and he said, Of course. Later on, however, he said he didn't like how westerners say that men and women are the same, because they are not, that women are like oysters – on the inside they are beautiful, like pearls, but they need a hard shell for protection.

By far the most interesting conversation we had was with a Moroccan farmer and his wife. The farmer knew a lot about U.S. politics, and asked us questions about Obama and Bush and our thoughts on their presidencies. He also expressed what most Moroccans said when we asked them what their views of Americans are: all the Americans they have met have been open and friendly, but they don't like American foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, or American support of Israel. They also don't think the American government is transparent and is not a true democracy because it doesn't do what the majority of Americans want. The most heartbreaking thing, though, was when we asked his wife what her dream was when she was

little, and she said her dream was to have an education. But she couldn't, because her father said it was too dangerous for her to walk alone to school as a girl.

I wish I had more opportunities to talk with women, because I mostly got a male perspective on Moroccan life. I am so curious to hear the thoughts and opinions of more Moroccan and Islamic women. The trip has made me think about how when people talk about Islamic countries and the repression of women, a lot of the focus is on the veil and the culture of chastity and modesty. After being in Morocco and seeing how Islam and these values create the identity of women, I don't see the veil or a culture of modesty as something repressive. Nor do I think the "sexual liberation" of women in the U.S. is necessarily an indication of more freedom. But I do see the problem with a culture of modesty for women if it suppresses their voice, if it means they defer to male voices and opinions because it is "unladylike" to speak out.

One of the biggest complaints of the Moroccan students we talked to was the poor quality of education in Morocco. A major problem is the language difference: at home students speak Moroccan Arabic; at school they are taught in classical Arabic (which is quite different), and then when they get to university everything is in French. Class wasn't really talked about, but I gathered from conversations that it is usually the wealthier families that know French. They are at an advantage, and there is no help for poorer students. Another frustration was how hard it is for Moroccans to travel and get visas - not only to Europe but even to other parts of Africa.

Overall, the experience made me realize how hard it would be for me to live in an Islamic country because, from the gender standpoint, the fundamental problem I have is with the religion, and it is not apparent whether that will change any time soon. However, it has made me very curious to learn about Muslim feminists and how Muslim women work within a religion that seems, to my outside eye, to work against them.

WHICH (EIGHT?) BOOKS SHOULD BE READ BY EVERY INTELLIGENT PERSON ON THE PLANET?

Neil deGrasse Tyson

A few weeks ago, on reddit.com, Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, astrophysicist, Director of the Hayden Planetarium, and humanist, responded to the question posed in the headline above. He selected eight books, and added brief comments to his choices.

The Bible - to learn that it's easier to be told by others what to think and believe than it is to think for yourself;

The System of the World (Newton) - to learn that the universe is a knowable place;

On the Origin of Species (Darwin) - to learn of our kinship with all other life on Earth;

Gulliver's Travels (Swift) - to learn, among other satirical lessons, that most of the time humans are Yahoos;

The Age of Reason (Paine) - to learn how the power

of rational thought is the primary source of freedom in the world;

The Wealth of Nations (Smith) - to learn that capitalism is an economy of greed, a force of nature unto itself;

The Art of War (Sun Tsu) - to learn that the act of killing fellow humans can be raised to an art;

The Prince (Machiavelli) - to learn that people not in power will do all they can to acquire it, and people in power will do all they can to keep it.

"If you read all of the above works", Dr. Tyson concluded, "you will glean profound insight into most of what has driven the history of the western world".

WHAT'S MISSING? ADD TWO TO THE LIST.

What, no *Hamlet*? No *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*? *The Republic*? *The Interpretation of Dreams*? *Huckleberry Finn*? Dr. Tyson's list is hard to beat (and puts this writer to shame), but let's round out the list to the usual Top Ten. What two must-reads would you add to the list? E-mail your selections - no more than two, please - to editor@shsny.org, or mail it to the P.O. box on page 1. - JR

A MODEST PROPOSAL: THE THREE-STATE SOLUTION

John Rafferty

The *New York Times* reported on January 14 that Israel's Health Ministry awarded a prize to Channa Maayan, a pediatrics professor, but would not let her accept the award in person.

"Not only did Dr. Maayan and her husband have to sit separately, as men and women were segregated at the event, but she was instructed that a male colleague would have to accept the award for her because women were not permitted on stage. ...

"At a time when there is no progress on the Palestinian dispute, Israelis are turning inward and discovering that an issue they had neglected - the place of the ultra-Orthodox Jews - has erupted into a crisis. And it is centered on women. ...

"The list of controversies grows weekly: Organizers of a conference last week on women's health and Jewish law barred women from speaking from the podium, leading at least eight speakers to cancel; ultra-Orthodox men spit on an 8-year-old girl whom they deemed immodestly dressed; the chief rabbi of the air force resigned his post because the army declined to excuse ultra-Orthodox soldiers from attending events where female singers perform; protesters depicted the Jerusalem police commander as Hitler on posters because he instructed public bus lines with mixed-sex seating to drive through ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods; vandals blacked out women's faces on Jerusalem billboards."

Israel's founding prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, offered the ultra-Orthodox - called "Haredim" in Israel - who almost vanished in the Holocaust, "subsidies and army exemptions to the few in Israel then, [because] he thought he was providing the group with a dignified funeral".

Today, the Haredim “have multiplied, joined government coalitions and won subsidies and exemptions for children, housing and Torah study. They now number a million, a mostly poor community in an otherwise fairly well-off country of 7.8 million”. They’re poor because for Haredi men studying Torah is more important than earning a paycheck. Which they can do because Israeli coalition governments—almost always based on partnerships of the mutually distrustful—buy the support of the Haredi political party, Shas, with more and more subsidies.

So now the tail not only wags but bites the dog, and the Haredim, who like the most rabid Palestinians won’t even formally acknowledge the right of Israel to exist (the Messiah hasn’t come – and good luck with that), and who are exempt from defending the country that defends them – or even obeying its secular laws—dominate Israeli politics, and are the state’s gravest internal security problem.

May I make a suggestion?

Expand the Israel-Palestine “two-state solution” to three. Give the Haredim whatever they want, but in their own segregated, misogynistic ghettos. Do whatever it takes to allow their scattered enclaves to get out of the secular Israel they loathe and form their own 17th-century state.

The benefits? The elimination of a huge drain on the Israeli economy; the neutralizing of a disruptive force in secular Israeli society; and the ability of a government in Jerusalem disencumbered of religious loonies to work toward a regional three-state solution between Israel, Palestine, and, hm, let’s see ... “Haredistan” has a nice ring to it.

HAVEN’T VOTED YET? CAST YOUR BALLOT NOW, FOR THE DUMBTH-OF-THE-YEAR 2011

Come on, it’s the second most important election of 2012, isn’t it – after “American Idol”, right? And you still have a couple of days – through January 31 – to weigh in with your choice for chowderhead of the year. Who gets the not-so-coveted horse’s-ass trophy for the most spectacularly wrong-headed or clueless statement of 2011?

Bill O’Reilly told American Atheist Group president David Silverman that religion wasn’t a scam because: “Tide goes in, tide goes out. It always comes in, and always goes out ... You can’t explain that.”

Newt Gingrich offered the contradictory illogic that unless America turns rightward, we could become “a secular atheist country, potentially one dominated by radical Islamists”.

Sarah Palin thinks the American Revolution was about the Second Amendment, and that Paul Revere’s famous ride “... warned, uh, the British that they weren’t gonna be takin’ away our arms ...”.

Michele Bachmann, convinced that God sent a hurricane and an earthquake to Washington, said, “I don’t know how much God has to do to get the attention of politicians ...” even though Congress, including her, was out of town.

Herman Cain wrote that Jesus Christ, “the perfect conservative”, was condemned to die by “a liberal court”.

E-mail your choice to editor@shsny.org, or leave a message at 212-308-2165, today! (Then vote again at our gala Darwin Day/Anniversary Dinner – see page 7) – JR

What does
Neil deGrasse Tyson
want you to read?
Page 11

Is the world getting safer?
(Book Club preview)
Page 8

Reserve now for our
Darwin Day/Anniversary
Dinner February 10
Page 7

Secular Humanist
Society of New York
FDR Station
PO Box 7661
New York, NY
10150-7661

