

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

December, 2013

“Ho-ho-ho” or “Bah, humbug” – your choice, but the season is upon us, and so we sing a carol, recite a limerick and parse our problems with historical Jesus and supply-sider Santa. We consider Christian end times, charity and kidnapping, and the Catholicism of the Pope. We tell a few jokes, wave a disdainful goodbye, question what we see and hear, the relevance of religion, the premise of postmodernism, and ask, Who is America’s Top God? But first, let’s go international. – JR

SHSNY JOINS

ATHEIST ALLIANCE INTERNATIONAL. LEMAIRE, RAFFERTY ASSUME ROLES

At a Board of Directors meeting of the Secular Humanist Society of New York on September 17, the nine members of the Board present voted unanimously to apply for Affiliate Membership (i.e., full voting rights) in Atheist Alliance International.

On October 27, we received notice that the Board of AAI approved our membership.

Founded in 1991, Atheist Alliance International is a global federation of atheist organizations



ATHEIST
ALLIANCE
INTERNATIONAL

and individuals, committed to educating the public about atheism, secularism and related issues.

As per the website (atheistalliance.org/about-aa) AAI’s vision is a secular world where public policy, scientific inquiry and education are not influenced by religious beliefs, but based upon sound reasoning, rationality and evidence.

Atheist Alliance International’s mission is to challenge and confront religious faith, to strengthen global atheism by promoting the growth and interaction of atheist/free-thought organizations around the world and to undertake international educational and advocacy projects.

Brian Lemaire will be SHSNY’s Primary Contact with AAI. SHSNY President John Rafferty has been appointed AAI’s Liaison to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and, along with representatives of International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and Center for Inquiry-International, will contribute to UN discussions regarding church-state separation and defense of freedom of conscience.

MERRY CHRISTMAS, RICH KIDS

Louise M. Antony

(Excerpted from “For the Love of Reason”, in *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, edited by Professor Antony.)

I also had problems with Santa Claus. I had no trouble with flying reindeer – remember that my world [of Catholic upbringing] was amply stocked with miraculous violations of physical law. The difficulty again was moral. Barbara Perkins, my friend who lived at the top of the hill near the bus stop, always got loads of presents “from Santa Claus” at Christmas time. We’re talking play kitchens, bicycles, puppies, Barbie dolls *with* Dream Houses – major loot. I, on the other hand, generally received one present from Santa, carefully selected and duly solicited from one of Santa’s department store “helpers” (I had asked about the baffling proliferation of Santas early on, and had received and accepted the standard answer), and this one present was never very grand.

Now this was curious, I thought. I understood that there were well-off families in the world, and not-so-well-off families, and I understood that mine was one of the not-so-well-off ones. But why did *Santa Claus* respect these distinctions? Why did he bring more toys to the rich kids than to the poor ones? Apparently, in cases of really indigent kids, he planned to bring nothing at all – why else the “toys for tots” drives at our church every Christmas? If anything, you’d think that Santa would try to *rectify* economic inequities – that he’d give that play kitchen to the little girl whose parents couldn’t afford to buy her anything. Was Santa a supply-sider?

I made the enormous social blunder of bringing this up with other kids, indeed, with Barbara Perkins herself. (I’m pretty sure I suggested that she could do a little to bring

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

John Rafferty, *President/Editor*; Robert A. Murtha, Jr., *Vice President*; Donna Marxer, *Treasurer*; Lee Loshak, *Secretary*; Remo Cosentino; Mirta Cotto; Arthur Harris; Brian Lemaire; Elaine Lynn; Carl Marxer; Irv Millman; Carlos Mora; John Wagner; Mike Weiss
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moral order to the universe by giving me her play kitchen.) They were not interested – reasonably enough: one’s not a kid forever, and there are cartoons to be watched. But adults didn’t appreciate my questions, either. I’d get a little patronizing approval for asking “such a serious question!” but once they saw that I really meant to know what was going on, they’d get irritated. I don’t know how I described their reactions to myself at the time, but as I remember them now, it seems clear that they, no less than their kids, thought I was being a colossal drag.

What I got from all of this was that thinking was fine and good, but only in its place. A little learning might be a dangerous thing, but a lot of thinking was worse. ... I still, to this day, resent the way I was made to feel as a child – that my questioning was inherently bad, that there was something wrong with *me* for wanting things to make sense.

**O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM,
HOW STILL WE SEE THEE LIE.
UM, SPEAKING OF LIES ...**

Reza Aslan

(From Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth, excerpted on delanceyplace.com, 9/27/2013)

As interest in the person of Jesus increased after his death, an urgent need arose among some in the early Christian community to fill in the gaps of Jesus’s early years and, in particular, to address the matter of his birth in Nazareth, which seems to have been used by his Jewish detractors to prove that Jesus could not possibly have been the messiah, at least not according to the prophecies. Some kind of creative solution was required to push back against this criticism, some means to get Jesus’s parents to Bethlehem so that he could be born [there].

For Luke [in his gospel], the answer lies in a census. “In those days”, he writes, “there came a decree from Caesar Augustus that the entire Roman world should be registered. This was the first registration to take place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone went to his own town to be registered. Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the city of David.” Then, in case his readers may have missed the point, Luke adds, “because Joseph belonged to the house and the lineage of David” (Luke 2:1-4).

Luke is right about one thing and one thing only. Ten years after the death of Herod the Great, in the year 6 C.E., when Judea officially became a Roman province, the Syrian governor, Quirinius, did call for a census to be taken of all the people, property, and slaves in Judea, Samaria, and Idumea – not “the entire Roman world”, as Luke claims, and definitely not Galilee, where Jesus’s family lived (Luke is also wrong to associate Quirinius’s census in 6 C.E. with the birth of Jesus, which most scholars place closer to 4 B.C.E., the year given in the gospel of Matthew). However, because the sole purpose of a census was taxation, Roman law assessed an individual’s property in the place of residence, not in the place of one’s birth. There is nothing written in

any Roman document of the time (and the Romans were quite adept at documentation, particularly when it came to taxation) to indicate otherwise. Luke’s suggestion that the entire Roman economy would periodically be placed on hold as every Roman subject was forced to uproot himself and his entire family in order to travel great distances to the place of his father’s birth, and then wait there patiently, perhaps for months, for an official to take stock of his family and his possessions, which, in any case, he would have left behind in his place of residence, is, in a word, preposterous.

... The readers of Luke’s gospel, like most people in the ancient world, did not make a sharp distinction between myth and reality; the two were intimately tied together in their spiritual experience. That is to say, they were less interested in what actually happened than in what it meant. It would have been perfectly normal – indeed, expected – for a writer in the ancient world to tell tales of gods and heroes whose fundamental facts would have been recognized as false but whose underlying message would be seen as true.

Hence, [the Gospel of] Matthew’s equally fanciful account of Jesus’s flight into Egypt, ostensibly to escape Herod’s massacre of all the sons born in and around Bethlehem in a fruitless search for the baby Jesus, an event for which there exists not a shred of corroborating evidence in any chronicle or history of the time whether Jewish, Christian, or Roman – a remarkable fact considering the many chronicles and narratives written about Herod the Great, who was, after all, the most famous Jew in the whole of the Roman Empire.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL WE CAN SING

(Transcribed from a YouTube video by The Second City Network, and forwarded by Aidan Rafferty)

Merry Christmas, neighbors,
although we don’t believe in Jesus Christ
or God above, which frankly seems naïve.

And though that may sound harsh,
we can’t change how we feel.

So what we’ll do this holiday
is pretend that God is real.

And at your Christmas dinner
we’ll act like we are praying,

while deep inside our conscious minds
we’re bemused by what you’re saying.

‘Cause if God could answer prayers
there’d be no famine, greed, or war.

But we’ll buy your bulls**t for one day,
‘cause that’s what friends are for.

We’ll recognize your ancient laws
as we gather every year.

It’s better to be loved than to make a point,
and enjoy some f**king Christmas cheer.

So we’ll pretend that God is real
in the spirit of the season.

Soon you’ll return to judging us
and we’ll go back to being heathen.

AND A CHRISTMAS LIMERICK

There was an old fellow of Dallas
Who was filled with atheist malice.
And on Christmas Eve
He cried, "I don't believe"
To small children, which was terribly callous.

JESUS WHO?

In the entire first Christian century, Jesus is not mentioned by a single Greek or Roman historian, religion scholar, politician, philosopher, or poet. His name never occurs in a single inscription, and it is never found in a single piece of private correspondence. Zero. Zip references.

– Dr. Bart Ehrman, *Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

HUMANISM, DIVERSITY AND POSTMODERNISM

Richard Martin

(Reprinted from *The Secular Circular*, newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara, November, 2013)

In Tom Flynn's editorial in the current *Free Inquiry*, he discusses how humanists disagree on many important issues, and the implications of that for what positions or commitments humanist organizations should adopt as their core missions. In a 2010 telephone survey, 75 percent of responding *Free Inquiry* subscribers said they were liberal, progressive, or socialist. The other 25 percent described themselves as moderate, centrist, libertarian, or conservative. However, these labels do not necessarily predict a person's position on controversial issues. For example a "liberal" may be "conservative" on Islam, as when John Coppejans says he is a liberal who believes that Islam is a danger to a free and democratic society. With this view, he is in the company of liberal humanists such as Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens.

Flynn cites Islam, overpopulation, the libertarian-progressive divide, and politics as examples of areas where there is much disagreement among secularists. The diversity of political beliefs among secularists was explored in the Council for Secular Humanism 2012 conference, followed by a lead article in *Free Inquiry*, "Does Secular Humanism Have a Political Agenda?". The short answer was "No". Flynn says that "Secular humanism clearly has no necessary link between it and any particular social, economic, or political policy prescription. For us, the Left is not always right."

He then discusses how postmodernism has shaped social-justice movements in recent decades. Postmodernism is largely a rejection of the assumed validity of scientific or objective efforts to explain reality. It is highly skeptical of values or explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative subjective truths of each person. It denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it rejects the idea of there being any scientific, philosophical, or social truths which are applicable to the world and humans in general. Of course, this means that by its own principles, it denies

itself. And it is obviously incompatible with humanism.

Flynn comments that postmodernism "repudiated the Enlightenment, rejected the possibility of universal knowledge not colored by ideological or class biases, advanced an idiosyncratic understanding of power relations among social groups, promoted a divisive model of identity politics, and lionized an approach to multiculturalism that would disempower any one group to form legitimate judgments about another's traditions".

An example of the latter is given by Sam Harris in his book *The Moral Landscape*.

"At the conclusion of my talk, I fell into debate with another invited speaker, who seemed, at first glance, to be very well positioned to reason effectively about the implications of science for our understanding of morality. She holds a degree in genetics from Dartmouth, a master's in biology from Harvard, a law degree, another master's, and a Ph.D. in the philosophy of biology from Duke. This scholar is now a recognized authority on the intersection between criminal law, genetics, neuroscience and philosophy. Here is a snippet of our conversation, more or less verbatim.

She: What makes you think science will ever be able to say that forcing women to wear burqas is wrong?

Me: Because I think that right and wrong are a matter of increasing or decreasing well-being - and it is obvious that forcing half the population to live in cloth bags, and beating or killing them if they refuse, is not a good strategy for maximizing human well-being.

She: But that's only your opinion.

Me: Okay ... Let's make it even simpler. What if we found a culture that ritually blinded every third child by literally plucking out his or her eyes at birth, would you then agree that we had found a culture that was needlessly diminishing human well-being?

She: It would depend on why they were doing it.

Me (slowly returning my eyebrows from the back of my head): Let's say they were doing it on the basis of religious superstition. In their scripture, God says, 'Every third must walk in darkness.'

She: Then you could never say that they were wrong."

With his comments about postmodernism in mind, Flynn says it is easy to understand another deep Left-Right divide among secularists about how much (if at all) their organizations should commit themselves to various social-justice agendas. He concludes that "the wisest—indeed the most secular—course is for unbeliever organizations to commit themselves solely to 'life-stance-central' issues, such as non-theism, free critique of all religions, church-state separation, civil rights of unbelievers, and the like."

I agree with this conclusion. We may have speakers, discussions, and even debates about controversial subjects such as those mentioned above, but we should keep in mind that they are not [humanist] core issues, and that disagreements about them do not mean that anyone is in conflict with humanist values.

THE IRRELEVANCE OF RELIGION

Lawrence M. Krauss

(Excerpted from the Preface to the Paperback Edition of A Universe From Nothing, which book was the focus of our November 25 Humanist 102 discussion.)

When it comes to understanding how our universe evolves, religion and theology have been at best irrelevant. They often muddy the waters, for example, by focusing on questions of nothingness without providing any definition of the terms based on empirical evidence. While we do not yet fully understand the origin of our universe, there is no reason to expect things to change in this regard. Moreover, I expect that ultimately the same will be true for our understanding of areas that religion now considers its own territory, such as human morality.

Science has been effective at furthering our understanding of nature because the scientific ethos is based on three key principles: (1) follow the evidence wherever it leads; (2) if one has a theory, one needs to be willing to try to prove it wrong as much as one tries to prove that it is right; (3) the ultimate arbiter of truth is experiment, not the comfort one derives from one's a priori beliefs, nor the beauty of elegance one ascribes to one's theoretical models.

NO, FOX AND MSNBC ARE NOT THE PROBLEM

Marty Kaplan

(Excerpted from "You Will Be Shocked at How Ignorant Americans Really Are" on altnet.com, 10/30/2013)

(Ed: After reviewing the Harvard study this spring about how little Americans understand income inequality in this country today, Mr. Kaplan turned to a new Pew Research study. - JR)

America's information inequality is at least as shocking as its economic inequality. Pew sliced the TV news audience into thirds: heavy, medium and light. In my Jeffersonian fantasy, that distribution would look like a bell curve; in fact, it looks like a cliff. ...

This month, the Pew Research Journalism Project reported how Americans get their news at home. If you think it's from the Internet, you'll be surprised that the 38 percent of us who access news at home on a desktop or laptop spend an average of only 90 seconds a day getting news online. America's dominant news source is television, and the disparity between heavy viewers of TV news and everyone else is as startling as the gap between the plutocrats and the people.

As for those heavy news viewers, says Pew, "There is no news junkie like a cable junkie." A heavy local news viewer watches about 22 minutes of it a day at home, and a heavy network news viewer watches about 32 minutes a day. But a heavy cable news consumer averages 72 minutes of it a day. The gap between heavy, medium and light cable news viewers is especially stark. If you're reading this, you're probably in that 72-minutes-of-cable-news-a-day class. But medium cable news viewers see barely more than three minutes of it a day, and light cable news viewers see about 12 seconds of it a day. In other words, either you live

in the country that watches more than an hour of Blitzer, O'Reilly, Maddow, et al, a day - or in the country that watches virtually none of them at all. ...

The kids are tuning out. I love it that 43 percent of "The Colbert Report" audience, and 39 percent of "The Daily Show" viewers, are 18 to 29 years old; the young audiences of those fake news shows get real news from them. But fewer than a million and a half Americans under 50 are watching them.

Much has been made of the ideological news bubbles we live in, where we see the world exclusively through Fox-colored lenses, or filters manufactured only by MSNBC or CNN. The Pew study upends this belief. It's true that about one-quarter of American adults watch only Fox News, another quarter watch only CNN and 15 percent watch only MSNBC. But 28 percent of Fox News viewers also watch MSNBC, and 34 percent of MSNBC viewers watch Fox. More than half of MSNBC viewers, and nearly half of Fox viewers, watch CNN, and of CNN's viewers, about 4 out of 10 also watch Fox, and 4 out of 10 also watch MSNBC.

It's encouraging that our self-segregation into polarized news ghettos is a bit of a myth. But whatever joy there is in that finding is blunted by the disparity between people who watch a lot of news and people who watch almost none of it, and by the trend toward an even deeper division ahead. The danger democracy faces isn't so much that different segments of our country inhabit alternative realities constructed from different data delivered by different news sources. It's that a minority of the country watches a fair amount of news, and a majority may as well be living on the moon.

STARSTRUCK

Donna Marxer

At an SHSNY Great Lectures On DVD evening October 21, we watched a 1999 Charlie Rose show on which he interviewed notables in the hard and soft sciences as part of his series on The Most Influential People of the 20th Century. The broadcast was in connection with *Time* magazine's choice for the most important figure of the century. Rose wasn't just exploring science; at the end of the show he indicated that other areas were being or had been covered, e.g., politics, the arts, literature, etc.

But this show covered science and among the guests were some names we recognize today, Steven Pinker, Maxine Singer, Daniel Dennett, and the editor of *Time*, among others. They offered "opinion in a spirited conversation that covers the splitting of the atom, the role of evil, physics, Albert Einstein, genius, the double helix, Hitler, anthropology, medicine, and diplomacy". Oh, and Freud.

And it was damn interesting. But, as I was listening, I could not help but interject my own ideas about this kind of selection. As an artist, I immediately thought that Picasso would be the indisputable winner in the field of art. He has to be credited with having drawn the map of the century. However, I know that Georges Braque and Juan Gris would have had to share the honors on the development of cubism. And they all three owe a debt to Cezanne. But Picasso was

the one who knew how to develop and sell the new vision to a wide audience. (He must have inspired Andy Warhol.) I know that every artist stands on the shoulders of the ones who went before and so am always ready to reject the whole notion of stardom.

I think it is the same in science and everything else. In America we celebrate innovation and those who think outside the box. However, you *need* a box, and some earlier body(s) had to construct that box.

More than that, we Americans are celebrity obsessed. We worship stars. I don't think any other country chooses the "star of the century". (Einstein was the winner, by the way, declared *Time*, an American magazine.)

I suggest we secular humanists run a contest for "Supernatural Star of the Centuries". I predict the winner would be "Jesus Christ Superstar", at least in America. Do you think the Muslims would agree?

Comment: How about it, readers? Your nominations for Greatest God Ever? Biggest Big Kahuna? Personally, I'm going to go with Zeus, who seems to have spent most of his time taking full advantage of His Almighty powers by serially boinking the best-looking women on earth, a pastime a lot more benign (and fun) than getting nailed up on a cross (the above-mentioned JC), or just drowning everyone (his Dad). - JR

ANSWERING THE QUESTION, "WHY DO YOU BOTHER?"

Tyson Gill

(Reprinted from Mr. Gill's guest post, Non-Belief as a Cause to Celebrate, on the Paleolibrarian blog, 11/14/2013)

(Ed: For those readers of PIQUE who are not atheists, just substitute the words "humanist" and "humanism", and this trenchant essay works for all of you/us, as well. - JR)

Of all the questions that we atheists get asked, of all the unintentional criticisms, perhaps the most common and the most confounding is, "Why bother with atheism?" It often gets posed with utmost sincerity by our most likeminded friends and associates. Implicit in the question is their bewilderment as to why we would focus so much attention and efforts on something so - "hollow".

They think atheism is just another expression of belief, but even worse, they see it is a negative position, a belief in nothing. They think of it as offering nothing affirmative to improve the human condition. It is a waste of time that seems unworthy of our efforts, they say. Our preoccupation with atheism seems to them as misdirected as dedicating one's energies in fighting against a belief in the Easter Bunny.

This questioning of the value of atheism as an important social cause is legitimate and deserves a really good answer.

You might start by pointing out that opposing belief in god isn't comparable to opposing a belief in the Easter Bunny. People don't actively worship the Easter Bunny and base their social and political decisions on egg mythology.

They don't organize to impose laws on all of us based upon divining Easter Bunny droppings. They don't insist

upon teaching the Great Colored Egg story of creation as science in our classrooms. If they did, then it would be quite necessary to become a reluctant warrior standing actively in opposition to bunny beliefs.

Then you can point out that there is nothing base or ignoble about standing in opposition to something dangerous or wrong. We consider it quite laudable to stand in principled opposition to all sorts of ideas and behaviors in our common social ecosystem. Movements stand in proud opposition to war, bigotry, racism, poverty, drug-abuse and all manner of social ills. Those who believe in god stand in principled opposition to abortion and religious discrimination. Why are those principled oppositions somehow more admirable than standing firmly in opposition to scientific ignorance and superstition?

Standing in opposition is not a hollow stance. Atheism is not a shallow worldview lacking its own deeply rooted underpinnings. Standing in opposition generally means that you stand firmly in support of a richly affirmative alternative. For atheists, standing in opposition to belief is inherently a passionate advocacy of a world based on science, reason and profoundly humanist values.

But while our friends might sympathize with our passion, many might still consider it unfortunate that we do not dedicate our efforts to some other social cause that is more worthy; a cause like fighting cancer or improving education or any number of social issues that are far more attainable and important. With so many vital and important causes that deserve our attention, why atheism?

It is not difficult to address this question of priority. Most atheists pick their battle over atheism because they judge that fact and evidence-based thinking is a fundamental prerequisite to overcoming the great host of challenges we face as a species. Many choose it precisely because far too few are willing to push back publicly against our debilitating deference toward religion, new-age thinking and faith-based beliefs of all kinds.

Lastly, be sure to discuss what may be the final concern of your dear friend. This is the assumption that religion is essential to accomplishing good works in the world - that a society based on secular values would be cold and heartless. Certainly many churches do good works and our atheist community must continually strive to do more. But it is not a given that faith is necessary for good works. One might argue that some people do some good with guns, or that some armies fight good wars, but to suggest that guns and wars are essential to a humane and sustainable planet is simply not a valid conclusion.

You can close by pointing out that if one day belief becomes marginalized, if it becomes relegated to the lunatic fringe who hold no sway over public policy, then atheists will be happy to lay down the burden of this particular struggle. But that would not mean their lives would be suddenly devoid of purpose. Rather, they will still continue to stand in support of a world based on facts, on science, on humanist ethics and sane, realistic responses to the very real struggles we face as a species.

SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER 2013 - FEBRUARY 2014

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, DEC 5, 7-8:30 pm
in the front room of
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

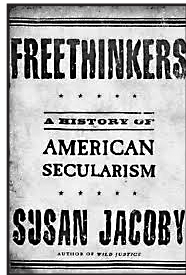
28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)
(3 doors West of the church - red door)
We'll discuss
**FREETHINKERS: A History of
American Secularism**
Susan Jacoby

An authoritative history of the vital role of secularist thinkers and activists in the United States, from a writer of "fierce intelligence and nimble, unfettered imagination" (*The New York Times*).

Freethinkers offers a powerful defense of the secularist heritage that gave Americans the first government in the world founded not on the authority of religion but on the bedrock of human reason.

In impassioned, elegant prose, celebrated author Susan Jacoby paints a striking portrait of more than two hundred years of secularist activism, beginning with the fierce debate over the omission of God from the Constitution. Moving from nineteenth-century abolitionism and suffragism through the twentieth century's civil liberties, civil rights, and feminist movements, *Freethinkers* illuminates the neglected accomplishments of secularists who, allied with liberal and tolerant religious believers, have stood at the forefront of the battle for reforms opposed by reactionary forces in the past and today. — *Paper & Kindle editions*

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



SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JAN 2, 7-8:30 pm
at Community Church of NY
28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)
**36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE
EXISTENCE OF GOD:**

A Work of Fiction

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

36 *Arguments for the Existence of God* plunges into the great debate of our day: the clash between faith and reason. Through the enchantment of fiction, award-winning novelist and MacArthur Fellow Rebecca Newberger Goldstein shows that the tension between religion and doubt cannot be understood through rational argument alone. It also must be explored from the point of view of individual people caught in the raptures and torments of religious experience in all their variety.

Using her gifts in fiction and philosophy, Goldstein has produced a true crossover novel, complete with a nail-biting climactic debate ("Resolved: God Exists") at Harvard. — *Paper & Kindle editions*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, FEB 6, 7-8:30 pm at
Community Church of NY
28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)

**THE OXFORD BOOK OF
MODERN SCIENCE WRITING**
Richard Dawkins, Ed.

Boasting almost one hundred articles and book excerpts, this is a breathtaking celebration of the finest writing by scientists (Gould, Pinker, Einstein, Huxley, Gardner, Dennett, Turing) packed with scintillating essays on everything from "The Discovery of Lucy" to "The Terror and Vastness of the Universe".

A must-read volume for all science buffs. — *Paper*

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION SUNDAY, DEC 15, 12 NOON MONTHLY CASUAL BRUNCH

New Restaurant:
Radiance
Fine Asian Cuisine
208 East 50 Street

Our first brunch at Radiance in November was a smash success – ask any of the 25 happy and well-fed attendees who gathered in our private space beyond the bar.

So we'll meet again at Noon between 2nd and 3rd Aves for outstanding Cantonese cuisine, including sumptuous \$12.95 to \$14.95 Lunch Specials and a huge menu of specialty teas.

December Brunch Discussion:
*How do we/should we humanists
celebrate the holy-days?*

(See pages 1-3)

MONDAY, DEC 16, 7:00 pm
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
THE LOVED ONE

It's Christmas - let's have a movie about funerals! This hilarious sendup of the American funeral business, based on Evelyn Waugh's novel, stars Jonathan Winters as the Reverend Blessed Galworthy, Liberace as a coffin salesman, and Robert Morse, Rod Steiger (you have to see him to believe him), Milton Berle, Dana Andrews, Anjanette Comer, James Coburn, and John Gielgud. "A gem of black humor."



After-film Discussion:
Burial? Cremation? Donation?
What's the humanist thing to do?

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
(But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)

SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER 2013 - FEBRUARY 2014

NO GREAT LECTURES ON DVD and NO HUMANISM 102 IN DECEMBER

Both Great Lectures on DVD (Wednesday) and Humanism 102 (Monday) are held during the last week (or so) of the month, and the Christmas-New Year scheduling crush is just too much. Both will return in January, e.g.:

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD Stone Creek Bar & Lounge 140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves) COLLISION

**Christopher Hitchens
vs. Douglas Wilson**

The atheist and the pastor (both smart and funny) on a debate tour arguing the question: "Is Christianity Good for the World?"

HUMANISM 102 MONDAY, JAN 27, 6:30-8:30 Community Church of New York 28 East 35 Street (red door) Meeting/Discussion #3:

The 'Sin' of Scientism
Readings

Online (both posted at shsny.org):
Steven Pinker: *Science is Not Your Enemy*

Leon Wieseltier: *Crimes Against Humanities*

Note: No book for January.

Note: You can do the online reading carefully in an hour or so. If you haven't done the reading, you may still audit the discussion – all are welcome!

LIKE SHSNY ON FACEBOOK

www.facebook.com/pages/The-Secular-Humanist-Society-of-New-York/168704396485734

AND MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

Ring in the real new year! REASONABLE NEW YORK WINTER SOLSTICE PARTY SATURDAY, DEC 21, 6-10 pm 49 Grove

49 Grove St (Christopher-7th Av)

Join your fellow free-thinkers at one of the hippest party venues in New York for a happy celebration of the true turning of the year – the winter solstice. All of Reasonable New York will be there – be there, too!

Center for Inquiry - New York City
Center for Inquiry - Long Island
Dinner & Philosophy Now
Ethical Humanist Society of L.I.

Gotham Atheists
Humanist Society of Metro New York
Jolly 13 Club

New York City Brights
New York City Skeptics
New York Philosophy
New York Society for Ethical Culture
Secular Coalition of New York

and, of course ...

Secular Humanist Society of New York
Free Admission!

\$14 Cocktails for \$7, \$7 Wine
Music, dancing, freethinking fun!

SUNDAY, DEC 1, 2:00 PM SUNDAY ASSEMBLY NEW YORK This month's theme: "Stars" NY Society for Ethical Culture 2 West 64 Street - Concert Hall

PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule is ...

Book Club: First Thursday
at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday
at Radiance

Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Humanism 101: Last Monday
at the Community Church of NY
More info: www.shsny.org;



OTHER REASONABLE NEW YORK EVENTS

CFI-NYC. Mon., Dec 16, 10 pm,
Googie's Lounge (Upstairs at the
Living Room), 154 Ludlow St.:
"Skeptics on the Mic Karaoke".

Gotham Atheists: For December
events, dates, and places, check
meetup.com/GothamAtheists/
NY Society for Ethical Culture:
Mon, Dec 2, 1 pm, Ethics in Lit-
erature: *Behind the Beautiful Forev-*
ers, by Katherine Boo. Snacks &
Bevs, \$5.

Tue, Dec 10, 6:30 pm, UN Human
Rights Day screening of *U.N. Me*
documentary; panel; reception
Fri, Dec 13, 6:30 pm, Ethics and
the Theater: *4,000 Miles*, by Amy
Herzog. Reception/Refresh-
ments, \$10 suggested donation.
Fri, Dec 20, Ethics in Film: *Twelve*
Angry Men. Snacks/Bevs, \$5 sug-
gested.

PLUS

Agnostic A.A.: Nine weekly
AA-endorsed meetings. agnosticAAAnyc.org/meetings.html
Atheism History Week – With
SHSNY's John Rafferty, 5:30 p.m.
Wednesdays, MNN Ch. 57 and
RNN Ch. 84 in Manhattan, and
live streaming at www.mnn.org.
Drinking With Atheists: Every
Friday, fun and conversation.
Details: [meetup.com/GothamA-](http://meetup.com/GothamAtheists/)
[theists/](http://meetup.com/GothamAtheists/)

**Feminist Freethinkers of New
York:** Check schedule at
feministfreethinkers.org
Manhattan History Buffs: Ev-
ery 3d Tues, 6:30, dinner/talk at
Lili's rest, 83-84th/3rd. Dec 17:
Check schedule at 212-802-7427

NEW PHONE FOR SHSNY

For more info or updates on
SHSNY events, call:

646-922-7389

... and leave a call-back number.

FOUR REASONS RIGHT-WING CHRISTIANS SALIVATE FOR THE END TIMES

Amanda Marcotte

(Excerpted from *alternet.com* 10/11/2013)

While there's much about the Christian right that's difficult for the rest of us to understand, the preoccupation with the "end times" is close to the top of the list. ... One-third of Americans believes that the Syrian conflict portends the end of the world.

What makes this even weirder is how many of them want this to be true. While speaking to Jan Markell on the radio show, "Understanding the Times", Rep. Michele Bachmann predicted that the conflict in Syria was a sign that the world was going to end

While she didn't come out and say it, the implication was crystal clear to the audience: President Obama is the Antichrist and his actions are going to kickstart the final battle between good and evil that will bring the end of the world. While most of us would be alarmed if we thought we were facing down the apocalypse and a worldwide war that will kill millions, Bachmann can't wait: "Rather than seeing this as a negative, we need to rejoice, Marana'tha Come Lord Jesus, His day is at hand."

Bachmann isn't alone in this belief that the end of days is something to be desired. Three out of four evangelicals believe Christ will return soon. This is, of course, mostly wishful thinking—they believe they're seeing the end of the world because they want to see the end of the world. Why would anyone want that, when the Bible they believe in predicts it will be mass murder, hellfire, and every grotesque thing imaginable? Here are some reasons.

1. *They don't think they'll be around for the worst of it.* Modern American fundamentalist Christians believe in something that has never before been part of Christian tradition: the Rapture. The idea is that the true believers will be whisked away into heaven before the ugly parts of the end times begin. The idea was invented in the 19th century but only took off in the late 20th century because of pop culture products like the *Left Behind* series.

As Christian writer and critic of evangelical culture Fred Clark explained, it's an "escapist fantasy" and a way to avoid having to consider the possibility that they may die. Christian writers don't really hide that this is what's going on with end times hope. ...

2. *The end of the world would mean they get to have the last word.* One thing that's indisputable is that if the apocalypse does come and it unspools as Christians predicted, they will have won the argument! ... While conservative Christians are most definitely not being persecuted, watching their privileges decline often makes them feel persecuted. When you feel put upon, mocked and persecuted, the desire to show your opponents you were right all along can become overwhelming. So much so, that you're willing to wish for a fiery apocalypse just so you can say I told you so.

3. *It provides a distraction from and an excuse to*

avoid the real problems in the world. The appeal of apocalypse fantasies is mainly that they help believers avoid the fear of death. ... However, belief that the end times are near is used by conservatives all the time to direct their followers politically.

That's what Bachmann was doing in that interview, using the belief in the end times to turn the audience against Obama and against his choices in Syria, without having to engage a real debate about what's really going on.

4. *They want to see the non-believers punished and themselves instated as the rightful rulers of all mankind.* Or as Fred Clark said in his criticism of the apocalypse fantasy books in the *Left Behind* series, "The authors' real message for those they regard as unsaved is to thumb their nose and do a little victory dance." ...

That's why, after any great tragedy, there is a rush of eager-beaver pastors willing to say this is what people have coming for being sinners, from Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson blaming "pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians" for 9/11 to John Hagee blaming the devastation of Hurricane Katrina on gay pride parades.

All of this is why someone who considers herself a good, loving Christian like Michele Bachmann can stand up and declare that the end of the world and all the violence predicted in the Bible is something to "rejoice" at. The popular hymn may state that "they will know we are Christians by our love", but when it comes to right-wing fundamentalists, a better bet to know them is by their apocalyptic revenge fantasies.

CALVIN EXPLAINS END TIMES TO HOBBS

Bill Watterson

(Transcribed from the *Calvin & Hobbes* comic strip, 6/5/13)
(Six-year-old Calvin has an eschatological discussion with his toy stuffed tiger – but real to Calvin – Hobbes.)

Calvin: The problem with people is they don't look at the big picture. Eventually, we're each going to die, our species will go extinct, the sun will explode, and the universe will collapse. Existence is not only temporary, it's pointless. We're all doomed, and worse, nothing matters.

Hobbes: I see why people don't like to look at the big picture.

Calvin: Well, it puts a bad day in perspective.

THE NEW CHRISTIAN CHARITY

John Rafferty

The Holier-than-Thou citizens of the fundamentalist Religious Right in America seem to have discovered a new enemy in their ongoing struggle against creeping socialism and the breakdown of moral order: the godless, overpaid and pampered parasites who serve up dinner in America's low-rent restaurants.

Consider the waitress at an Applebee's restaurant in Missouri who got this note written on the check she had presented to a church pastor:

"I give God 10%. Why should you get 18?"

Really, the minister of a Christian church.

And that's no isolated incident. As Huffington Post has reported and Bill Maher has mocked, news stories by the dozens are coming out of the traditional Bible Belt South of people who call themselves Christians (loudly and proudly) stiffing the often-minimum-wage people who serve them. And it's not always only about money.

In Kansas, instead of a tip a Christian family left their server, whom they knew was gay, this note:

"Thank you for your service, it was excellent. That being said, we cannot in good conscience tip you, for your homosexual lifestyle is an affront to GOD. Queers do not share in the wealth of GOD, and you will not share in ours."

Isolated incidents? I don't think so, not when hundreds of fake \$10 bills are showing up all across the Bible Belt, left on tables in lieu of a genuine tip. On their face, they look like the real thing (*Ten bucks at Papa John's or Cracker Barrel? Good tip!*), but the reverse says:

"Some things are better than money ... like your eternal salvation that was bought and paid for by Jesus going to the cross."

Yeah, and some things are better than sanctimonious bullshit. And at the top of that list would be enough money at the end of an eight- or ten-hour mind-numbing and footsore shift (I know, I've been a waiter) to feed and clothe the waitress's kids.

Of course she could always, as Maher suggests, pay forward that \$10 bill. The next time she's in church, drop it in the collection plate.

KIDNAPPING FOR JESUS

John Rafferty

(Thanks to Gretchen Robinson for forwarding this on Facebook)

Here's an online appeal currently circulating in Texas, verbatim:

Praying for you > Abolish Human Abortion

Please share this email far and wide among Christian groups. Cicada.collective.ntx@gmail.com

It's the email address being used by a group backed by Fund Texas Women and Lilith Fund looking for volunteers to shuttle TX women around for their abortion appointments. Consider volunteering yourself. I'm not suggesting you actually take a woman to an abortion clinic but it's a wonderful opportunity to minister to an abortion minded woman for an hour while you DON'T take her to a clinic. And hey even if you can't change her mind by the time she gets out of your car and realizes she is at a church and not the clinic she's missed her appointment anyway.

Yes, this actually advises people to kidnap women, because that's what denying someone their freedom by detaining them, as much by deceit as by force, is — kidnapping.

Why isn't someone at "Abolish Human Abortion" in prison?

ARE ONLINE PETITIONS ACTIVISM?

Joel Galker

If you're at all active in the secular community it's likely you've received emails asking you to sign a wordy online petition in support of a worthy secular cause. If Pope Francis signs it, will anybody notice?

Several weeks ago I received a request to sign an online petition in support of a secular activist being prosecuted in a foreign country but I needed to think about it because if the goal was to actually help him it seemed to me that it couldn't possibly succeed. From my recollection, when our politicians and public officials have gotten involved in trying to help people in the clutches of foreign governments it's been the result of private appeals and private diplomacy, rather than lobbying in public.

I just recently received another email from the petition sponsors reporting on the numbers of people who had signed it and how close the number had come to their target. And it occurred to me, anyone who has access to email in the US and across the world could have signed it. I'd be very surprised if a list of uncertified signers who could be living almost anywhere on the planet are going to get any attention.

Don't we expect elected officials to pay attention to actual potential voters within their own election districts? And what happens in other parts of the world regarding the crimes of religion is of no particular interest to our legislators.

It's obvious that I don't think that online petitions are likely to achieve their stated aims. But if you got the request and didn't know about the particular issue before, consider your consciousness raised.

There are significant ethical questions to be asked:

If signing or circulating a petition has little or no probability of succeeding in its stated aim does that mean it also does no harm?

Is it a diversion from what are likely to be more achievable if limited goals?

Is it a false feel-good gesture, a sop that detracts from internal moral pressures to do something substantive?

Does it foster a well-intended but shallow lip service variety of humanism?

Is, "Well you have to do something", enough of a commitment to be worth anything?

Is it disingenuous for petition sponsors to claim efficacy on the basis of their success in gathering signatures instead of bringing about actual outcomes? And should we support them in these projects?

I'm not sure of all the answers but I feel sure that our obligation is to be effective in directing our efforts to specific concrete, achievable goals to whatever extent we're able and willing to give. And beyond that, to give more exclusively to the wellbeing of our loved ones, our chosen communities and ourselves. I'm not entirely happy with that answer but I wouldn't want it to be conflated with let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may Libertarianism.

Comment: "Went to the concert, bought the t-shirt, done." – JR

IS THE POPE CATHOLIC?

That headline is an old smart-ass rejoinder to any question whose answer is obvious. Other examples: “Does the bear crap in the woods?” or “Does Judy Garland sing ‘Over the Rainbow?’”

But not to Sarah Palin. She has real doubts about the new pontiff, who has suggested that maybe the Church shouldn’t “obsess” about “small-minded issues” like contraceptives, abortion and gay marriage.

“Having read through media outlets”, she said, “he’s had some statements that to me sounded kind of liberal, has taken me aback, has kind of surprised me.”

You know what kind-of surprised me? She’s read something. – JR

This just in, anonymously, via the internet: “If Sarah Palin thinks the Pope is too liberal, wait ‘til she meets Jesus.”

A LESSON LEARNED FROM FRANCE

Stan Friedland

As a former high school principal and life-long educator, I particularly enjoyed the opening article by Jean Rafferty (“*Allons Enfants de la (secular) Patrie ...*” PIQUE, September) about French education, its Education Minister, Vincent Peillon, and its outstanding Secular School Charter. *Magnifique!*

Why? Because it’s not just a charter, it’s a complete statement of goals, objectives, educational philosophy and, when used correctly, a set of guidelines for lesson planning by teachers at every grade level. Except for numbers 10 and 15 in this list of principles, which stress the importance of secularism and the need to focus upon it, this charter list can be most applicable to American schools and we’d be the better off for it.

Why? It’s a guideline for teachers to develop lesson plans that *reach the critical thinking level!* Charter principle number 12 says, “Studies are secular. No subject is a priori excluded from scientific and pedagogical inquiry.” I interpret that to mean that all subject matter needs to be taught to the highest levels of the “Cognitive Domain of Learning”, namely, “the Critical Thinking level”. American teaching at the public school level is significantly weak in this area, primarily because we’ve become so test-dominated and test-pressured that teachers, in their daily race against limited time to cover over-abundant curricula, usually motor-mouth their way through lessons, leaving their students at the *lower* levels of cognition.

Let me explain briefly. There are only three domains of learning: the Psycho-Motor domain, the Cognitive Domain and the Affective domain. Schools spend most of their time in the Cognitive Domain, which has six ascending levels of learning, from the bottom up, Knowledge, Comprehension, Application (Applicability) Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation. The types of testing, especially standardized ones, that are the ones that determine the “effectiveness” of a teacher or a school, are most often at the first two levels, occasionally get to three and four, and rarely ever reach five

or six. Teachers, in order to get through their voluminous curriculums, usually stay at the first two levels because they can be covered more quickly by lecture and teacher-centered teaching.

When a school class lesson is good enough to reach that level and ask students to “evaluate” the subject matter in those ways, the able teacher is compelling kids to think critically. Do that from K-12 – 13 years’ worth of critical thinking – and you’ll have a truly educated high school graduate, able to look critically at all issues and decisions facing her or him.

What could be better than that? Ahhh, if only.

DON’T GO AWAY MAD, CHARLIE HYNES, JUST GO AWAY

Michael Powell

(Excerpted from “After Ugly Campaign, Finding Little Grace in Brooklyn District Attorney’s Exit”, in The New York Times, 11/11/2013)

(Ed: Over the years, Brooklyn’s once-great District Attorney, Charles J. Hynes, got way too close to and even dependent upon the black hats of the borough’s Hasidim, turning a blind eye to their cover-ups of child abuse in their community for the sake of their bloc-voting power (“A Shandeh”, PIQUE, June, 2012, et. seq.). Democrats rejected him in their September primary, then everyone did when he ran as a bogus Republican/Conservative in the general election in November. Good riddance, but it seems Charlie refused to go gracefully. – JR)

Sam Kellner, a voluble whistle-blower against child sexual abuse in Brooklyn’s Hasidic community, received a much-dreamed-of phone call last week. Two prosecutors with the Brooklyn district attorney’s office promised to drop all charges against Mr. Kellner. An already-weak extortion case had utterly disintegrated, with evidence falling away.

You’ll soon be free of the shadow of prosecution, Mr. Kellner’s lawyers told him.

That was last Wednesday.

Two days later, District Attorney Charles J. Hynes and his rackets chief and longtime friend Michael F. Vecchione reversed that decision and again vowed to prosecute Mr. Kellner. They promptly demoted the two veteran prosecutors, Joseph Alexis and Nicholas J. Batsidis, who had handled the case against Mr. Kellner.

Mr. Hynes was not finished. That same day, he fired Barbara Burke, a prosecutor and former nun who had had the temerity to complain that the office had not passed along—as required—all records to a lawyer trying a wrongful conviction case against Mr. Hynes and Mr. Vecchione.

His Friday afternoon massacre complete, Mr. Hynes turned his attention to his vacation in Bermuda. ...

The case against Mr. Kellner offers its own theater of the bizarre. After a prominent Hasidic cantor, Baruch Lebovits, was accused of groping his son, Mr. Kellner helped investigators with the district attorney’s office to find other young victims.

He found himself denounced on the street and barred from *shul*. His business suffered; he pawned his silverware last year. Still he persisted, and slowly picked up allies. Members of a prominent rabbinical court told me earlier this year that they had given Mr. Kellner, whom they viewed as a brave pioneer, permission to seek out victims of Mr. Lebovits, whose predatory reputation was broadly known.

In 2011, Mr. Hynes's office convicted Mr. Lebovits of sexual abuse. It was, for Mr. Hynes, a rare successful prosecution of a prominent Hasidic figure, and it angered many in that politically influential community. Then his office turned around and indicted Mr. Kellner, based on a secret tape and the grand jury testimony of Moshe Friedman, a prominent Satmar supporter of Mr. Lebovits [alleging that Kellner had tried to extort Lebovits]. ...

That case descended into parody. A tape went missing. Evidence changed. This past July, the case hit a nadir, as prosecutors handed over evidence that a witness against Mr. Kellner had contradicted himself repeatedly. This witness was himself fleeing abuse allegations.

"This case has something to haunt everyone's conscience," noted Niall MacGiollabhui, Mr. Kellner's lawyer. "Last week, it became bizarre beyond belief."

Mr. Kellner's charm is his insistence on not presenting himself as a saint. His search for justice for his son came to enfold the pain of many victims.

"They make me out to be the monster," he said Monday, pacing. "I say, this is for real, you are all in cahoots? You don't care about your children?"

So a lonely man has justice grabbed away. And a broken-down horse of a politician comes up lame.

READERS RESPOND TO NOVEMBER PIQUE ...

To the Editor: Though there is lot to think about and discuss on the nature of science, belief and education in the issue (November PIQUE, pages 1-4), I'll refrain from tilting at windmills. Given what's happening in this country, an intelligent and reasoning individual should not be surprised that most people arrive at decisions based on their beliefs rather than evidence. The articles make it all too clear how prevalent "unreasoning" Americans are. Very discouraging.

Perhaps education should be directed solely on how to reason soundly, rather than worrying about mastery of specific subjects. Michael Shermer ("Why We Should Choose Science Over Beliefs") gave a particularly illustrative example of what is wrong with our body politic and national psyche today. Brave of him to publicly confess his "rebirth" on the questions of climate change and guns. – *Remo Cosentino*

... AND TO OCTOBER'S ISSUE

To the Editor: Great issue of PIQUE – articles diverse, dynamic and of great informational value. How do you keep improving the quality of PIQUE, issue after issue, when they're all so damn good to begin with? I'm a member of half a dozen secular organizations, each having a good newsletter, but PIQUE is two levels above their best. October

was most enjoyable, informative and interesting. *Vive le PIQUE!* – *Stan Friedland*

P.S.: Your book is next on my purchase list, detained only till the high volume on my reading shelf gets whittled down a bit. Accolades and many thanks. – *Stan*

Note: Stan is referring to "A Fit of Pique", by John Rafferty, which would (ahem) make a great holiday gift for any humanist on your list, and is available for just \$17 at editor@shsnny.org.

MAYBE WE SHOULD TRY THE UK FOR BRUNCH

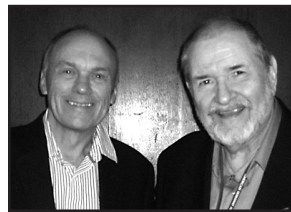
John Rafferty

So ... there we were on Sunday morning, October 20, in front of our monthly Casual Brunch venue, Belgian bistro Brabant, as our distinguished visitors from the UK approached: John Adams of the British Humanist Association and Chairman of the North Yorkshire Humanist Group (our hands-across-the-sea fraternalists – New York and Old York, get it?), and his delightful wife, Judith.

One eentsy problem, John and Judith – our restaurant had a fire last night, and is closed (as it turns out, for good). Luckily, a quick call to The Press Box got all 16 of us seated and fed, but conversation was limited.

The Brits took it in carry-on stride, and two nights later John charmed the audience at our evening at Ethical Culture with ACLU Past-President Norman Dorsen, and extended an invitation to us to attend the IHEU tri-annual World Humanist Congress 2014, at Oxford next August.

After the meeting, John Wagner, Carl Marxer, Donna Marxer and I repaired to Café Fiorella with John and Judith to share wine, ideas and opinions on humanist-society organization, membership, event planning, and fund raising – issues that are the same on both sides of the pond.



The two Johns

A delightful visit – hurry back, John and Judith. **Update 1:** So ... restaurant maven Irv Millman found Parnell's for our monthly brunch and we reserved for November 17. I posted it on Meetup and our own distribution list on Sunday night, November 3, and got an email from Tunç Iyriboz at 6:30 the next morning:

John: you may have to reconsider: there was a big fire on my block this morning, appearing to originate from Parnell's kitchen. Firefighters just arrived.

Parnell's is closed "for two or three months". Mike Weiss suggests "divine retribution". *You think?*

Update 2: After hearing John Adams's report of his visit, one of the Yorkshire humanists has suggested a program of NYC-Yorkshire house/apartment swaps and/or informal put-ups. No specific plans yet, but if you're interested in exploring the idea, email editor@shsnny.org.

The United States and Great Britain are two countries separated by a common language. – *Attributed to George Bernard Shaw in the 1940s.*

SEEING WHAT YOU'VE MADE UP YOUR MIND YOU WANT TO SEE

Alex Kane

(Excerpted from AlterNet, 8/13/2013)

In August, people who attend a Catholic Church in Fresno, California took to congregating at a tree in front of the cathedral. Because there is liquid coming from the tree, worshippers think it's a miracle.

"When you say 'Glory be to God in Jesus' name', the tree starts throwing out more water," one worshipper said.

But in reality, arborist Jon Reelhorn says, there's a simple reason why there's liquid coming from the tree.

"Aphids, tree lice, will suck the tree's sap, the sap goes through the aphid and then it becomes a honey dew excrement from the aphid and it gets so heavy in the summertime that it will drip down."

Aphid poop.

But worshipper Maria Ybarra isn't buying the scientist's explanation. "I can tell you looking at it from a scientific standpoint and a spiritual standpoint it is the work of God manifesting here on earth."

HEARING WHAT YOU'VE MADE UP YOUR MIND YOU WANT TO HEAR

Diana Nyad is the 64-year-old marathon swimmer who made headlines in September by swimming 110 miles from Cuba to Florida (without a cage in shark-infested waters).

So Oprah Winfrey, who mashes together New Age nonsense ("Every time I enter my yard I say, 'Hello, trees!'") with an outsize belief in her own omniscience, invited Nyad to Oprah's Super Soul Sunday show, to talk about her religious beliefs.

Nyad: I'm an atheist. I can stand at the beach's edge with the most devout Christian, Jew, Buddhist, go on down the line, and weep with the beauty of this universe and be moved by all of humanity - all the billions of people who have lived before us, who have loved and hurt.

So to me, my definition of God is humanity and is the love of humanity.

Oprah: Soo ... what I'm hearing is you're not really an atheist.

JOKES FOR INTELLECTUALS

Chrissy Stockton

(Lifted from thoughtcatalog.com by Brian Rafferty)

A logician's wife is having a baby. The doctor immediately hands the newborn to the dad. His wife asks impatiently, "So, is it a boy or a girl?" The logician replies: "Yes".

Wife walks in on husband, a string theorist, in bed with another woman. He shouts, "I can explain everything!"

There are two types of people in the world: those who can extrapolate from incomplete data sets

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Christmas for rich kids

Page 1

SHSNY joins AAJ

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