

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

December, 2014

Ho, ho, ho – okay? In the Holiday spirit we consider suicide, death, and the craziest, coffee-hating churchman in New York. Also, what Americans *really* want for Christmas (less religion), how many messiahs didn't make the everlasting-fame cut, and how not-so-rare virgin births seem to be. We take advice from a Humanist of the Year, let science kick around philosophy again, kick God down the evolutionary stairs, and – Oh, what the hell, offer up some holiday gift ideas on page 5. – JR

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.*

MESSIAH? TAKE YOUR PICK

Reza Aslan

(Excerpted from *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*)

The first century was an era of apocalyptic expectation among the Jews of Palestine, the Roman designation for the vast tract of land encompassing modern-day Israel/Palestine as well as large parts of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Countless prophets, preachers, and messiahs tramped through the Holy Land delivering messages of God's imminent judgment.

Many of these so-called false messiahs we know by name. A few are even mentioned in the New Testament. The prophet Theudas, according to the book of Acts, had four hundred disciples before Rome captured him and cut off his head. A mysterious, charismatic figure known only as "the Egyptian" raised an army of followers in the desert, nearly all of whom were massacred by Roman troops. In 4 B.C.E., the year in which most scholars believe Jesus of Nazareth was born, a poor shepherd named Athronges put a diadem on his head and crowned himself "King of the Jews"; he and his followers were brutally cut down by a legion of soldiers.

Another messianic aspirant, called simply "the Samaritan", was crucified by Pontius Pilate even though he raised no army and in no way challenged Rome – an



indication that the authorities, sensing the apocalyptic fever in the air, had become extremely sensitive to any hint of sedition. There was Hezekiah the bandit chief, Simon of Peraea, Judas the Galilean, his grandson Menahem, Simon son of Giora, and Simon son of Kochba – all of whom declared messianic ambitions and all of whom were executed by Rome for doing so.

Add to this list the Essene sect, some of whose members lived in seclusion atop the dry plateau of Qumran on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea; the first-century Jewish revolutionary party known as the Zealots, who helped launch a bloody war against Rome; and the fearsome bandit-assassins whom the Romans dubbed the Sicarii (the Daggermen), and the picture that emerges of first-century Palestine is of an era awash in messianic energy.

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'TIS THE SEASON ... FOR VIRGIN BIRTHS?

Sharon Begley

(Excerpted from "Claims of virgin births in U.S. near 1 percent: study", Reuters, 12/17/2013)

Nearly 1 percent of young women in a U.S. study who have become pregnant claim to have done so as virgins, according to a report in the Christmas edition of Britain's *BMJ* medical journal.

The authors of "Like a Virgin (Mother)" - whose prose is devoid of irony - say such scientifically impossible claims show researchers must use care in interpreting self-reported behavior. Fallible memory, beliefs and wishes can cause people to err in what they tell scientists.

Based on interviews with 7,870 women and girls ages 15 to 28, 45 of the 5,340 pregnancies in this group through the years - 0.8 percent - occurred in women who reported that they conceived independent of men.

The researchers found that although the mothers in question were more likely to have boys than girls, and to be pregnant during the weeks leading up to Christmas, neither similarity to the Virgin Mary was statistically significant.

WHAT AMERICANS REALLY WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

Jonathan Engel

It's that time of year again. Hard as my fellow non-believers might try, it's almost impossible to ignore the fact that the "Christmas Season" is fast upon us. It is also the time of year for Fox News to start decrying the "War on Christmas" (insert ominous music here). For those of you who have been fortunate enough to avoid this nonsense up to now, the "War on Christmas" is a non-phenomenon that Fox News has been trotting out in November/December the past few years every time someone points out the fact that Nativity scenes do not belong in public, government owned/operated settings. Or when some well-known company or individual decides to wish their customers/fans (I shudder to think of it) "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas". Just imagine the crippling damage done to poor, downtrodden Christians in this country, to have to bear the indignity of someone wishing them "Happy Holidays". Why, Sarah Palin is actually releasing a book on the topic called *Good Tidings and Great Joy: Protecting the Heart of Christmas*.

As I write this, it is now early/mid-November. Taking a look at the TV schedule for Monday November 10 (Happy Veterans Day!) we see that the Hallmark Channel will be showing the following full-length movies that day: *A Carol Christmas*; *November Christmas*; *Moonlight and Mistletoe*; *Single Santa Seeks Mrs. Clause* (no, I did not make that one up); *Hitched for the Holidays*; *Naughty or Nice*; *A Family Thanksgiving* (How did that one get in there? Note to self: Alert Fox News!); and *Christmas Song*. Not to be outdone, Lifetime's schedule for the same day includes the following movies: *His and Her Christmas*; *A Nanny for Christmas*; and

All About Christmas Eve (Joseph Mankiewicz, who wrote and directed the classic *All About Eve* should sue from the grave).

As a non-Christian, I find all of this somewhat amusing. This time of year we are inundated with all things Christmas, regardless of the warped world views of Fox News and Sarah Palin. It really doesn't bother me, except when religion intrudes into the public/government sphere, which is unconstitutional and therefore does bother me quite a bit. But as for private companies, their going Christmas-crazy disturbs me not one whit. Cable television networks like Hallmark and Lifetime are in the business of giving their viewers what they want to see, and if saccharine, cookie-cutter "Christmas" movies are what they want, that's ok with me. If I don't want to watch them, I don't have to. But if we dig a little deeper, I think we can find something a bit more interesting going on here.

If one can stomach looking at the plot synopses of these movies, one sees that virtually none of them are religiously oriented. Mostly they're stories about lonely people finding true love, or overcoming adversity, or re-connecting with family. Basically the same pap that Hallmark and Lifetime show throughout the year, except that they take place during Christmas time, so the screen can be filled with snowmen, twinkling lights, sidewalk Santas and stockings hung by the fire, none of which are mentioned in the Bible. But the story of the birth of Jesus? Virtually nowhere to be found. ... This is a capitalist country, and businesses, whether retail stores or television networks, desire only to give the people what they want, and they go to great lengths, including surveys, focus groups, and contracts with rating agencies such as A.C. Nielsen to find out what that common desire might be.

So evidently, what people want is the secular side of Christmas, and hold the religion, please. If people wanted movies about Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the Wise Men, that's what these networks would be showing, but they're not.

Think about our most popular and enduring "Christmas" movie: *It's a Wonderful Life*. The film opens with a shot of stars in the heavens, with a great, powerful, basso profundo voice (presumably God; who else talks like that?) telling the angel-in-training Clarence about a good man named George Bailey who had grown discouraged with life. This part lasts about two minutes; for the next two hours we see a synopsis of George's life wherein religion and Christmas are not mentioned at all. Then George suffers a terrible setback and becomes suicidal. Clarence, actually acting more like a good mental health professional than a supernatural "angel" helps George to see the positive aspects of his life and how much he means to his family, friends and community, thereby dissuading him from suicide. Clarence says nothing about the religious consequences of taking one's own life. No fire and brimstone here for committing the sin of suicide; just a reasonable demonstration about how much George really has to live for. Of course, the ending has that wonderful scene of George running through that idyllic looking small town in the snow shouting "Merry Christmas

Everybody!" But the religious aspects of Christmas are not mentioned at all. The film's esteemed director, Frank Capra, did not even consider it to be a "Christmas" movie, and was as surprised as anyone when years after its release it became the holiday fixture that it is today.

So what does this tell us about what Americans think about and want from Christmas? Undoubtedly there are some for whom Christmas is a sacred and holy day meant for remembering the birth of their savior Jesus Christ. On the other hand, there are non-Christians who could do without the whole thing. But it appears that most Americans want the secular aspects of Christmas, at least for the weeks (now months) that lead up to the big day itself. So long as government stays out of it, that's fine with me. But this seems to discomfit greatly those who implore their fellow Americans to "put Christ back in Christmas".

Too late; that horse has already left the manger. While I look forward to the day when people structure their lives around reason instead of superstitions that originated thousands of years ago, I have no desire to impose my beliefs on others by coercion or intimidation. I may try to persuade my fellow Americans to base their lives on rational thinking, but I know that such thinking must ultimately come from within, and cannot and should not be imposed from without. Unlike Fox News and Sarah Palin,

I'm content with allowing private individuals and businesses to celebrate the season however they want. It seems that most Americans want their Christmas, but they want it light, breezy and with a bit of uplift, but without the actual Biblical part, regardless of what bumper stickers religious scolds may put on their cars. I can live with that; can they?

CHRIS ROCK ON THE REAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS IN AMERICA

(Excerpted from his opening monologue on "Saturday Night Live", 11/1/2014)

In America there are no "sacred days", we commercialize everything. We're only five years away from "9/11 Sales". You'll hear it on the radio: "Come on down to Red Lobster, these shrimp are just nine dollars and eleven cents."

Doesn't matter what the holiday is. Martin Luther King Day is gonna be the same thing. You're watching TV: "Free at last, free at last, these Toyotas are practically free at last!" It's America, we commercialize everything. Look what we did to Christmas.

Christmas! Christmas is Jesus's birthday. Now, I don't know Jesus, but from what I've read, Jesus is the least materialistic person to ever roam the Earth. No bling on Jesus. Matter of fact, we have the Jesus Birthday Season, a whole season of materialism.

And at the end of the Jesus Birthday season we have the nerve to have an economist come on TV and tell us how horrible the Jesus Birthday Season was this year.

"Oh, the Jesus Birthday Season was horrible this year - hopefully, business will pick up by His crucifixion."

EDWARD O. WILSON SAYS: SCIENCE, NOT PHILOSOPHY, WILL EXPLAIN THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE

Big Think Editors

(Transcribed from BigThink.com, 11/4/2014)

Biologist Edward O. Wilson, a two-time Pulitzer Prize recipient and the author of the new book, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, knew that it was vital that he define "meaning" early on in his book, lest he be attacked by a hornet's nest of philosophers. Thus, he identifies the meaning of meaning as:

What are we and why?

Where do we come from?

Where are we most likely to be headed?

Wilson believes those questions cannot be explained with religion for two reasons. First, because every religious faith has a different creation story that, almost categorically, is in competition with every other creation story. Second, because every religious faith is a product of human culture. To assume that human culture can explain meaning is to put a whole lot of trust in introspection, yet Wilson says we can't discover meaning just by thinking about it. The facts lie elsewhere.

This is also why Wilson believes philosophy is ill-equipped to tackle the meaning of existence. In fact, the storied biologist has few kind words for the field as a whole:

"I like to say that most of philosophy, which is a declining and highly endangered academic species, incidentally, consists of failed models of how the brain works. So students going into philosophy have to learn what Descartes thought and then after a long while why that's wrong and what Schopenhauer might have thought and what Kant might have thought or did think. But they cannot go on from that position and historical examination of the nature of humanity to what it really is and how we might define it."

Wilson concludes then that, by default, the task of explaining meaning necessarily falls to science. There are five disciplines in particular which he identifies as the leaders in determining meaning:

1. *Evolutionary biology: "That is, biology seen in a historical context going all the way back millions of years to the origin of the human species."*

2. *Paleontology: "Which segues as we come closer to modern humanity and the invention of agriculture and the birth of the Neolithic period turns into archaeology. So archaeology and paleontology, which are on a different time scale, is the other discipline, a second discipline."*

3. *Neuroscience: "Progressing so rapidly in so many ways."*

4. *Artificial Intelligence: "Coming out of brain science or running parallel to it and trading with it and depending upon it and deriving from it."*

5. *Robotics: "The notion of studying the mind in perfecting artificial intelligence, and more than that; creating what the artificial intelligence and robotics people call whole brain*

emulation. That is, using robots as avatars and creating robots that are by design an imitation of what we know about the brain more and more like humans."

The five disciplines above serve as bridges "to tell us what the meaning of humanity is". Wilson calls it the product of a grand epic, the full story of humanity. Together, they will explain what we are, where we came from, and where we're going.

Ed: To see the full 9-minute video, go to: <http://bigthink.com/think-tank/science-not-philosophy-will-explain-the-meaning-of-life-with-edward-o-wilson>

WHY INTERNET "NET NEUTRALITY" IS VITAL FOR FREETHINKERS

Amanda Marcotte

(Excerpted from "Why It's Harder Than Ever for Religions to Con Their Followers", on AlterNet, 11/12/2014)

While the burgeoning atheist movement loves throwing conferences and selling books, a huge chunk—possibly most—of its resources go towards the internet. This isn't born out of laziness or a hostility to wearing pants so much as a belief that the internet is uniquely positioned as the perfect tool for sharing arguments against religion with believers who are experiencing doubts. It's searchable, it allows back-and-forth debate, and it makes proving your arguments through links much easier. Above all else, it's private. An online search on atheism is much easier to hide than, say, a copy of *The God Delusion* on your nightstand.

In recent months, this sense that the internet is the key for atheist outreach has started to move from "hunch" to actual, evidence-based theory. Earlier this year, Allen Downey of the Olin College of Engineering in Massachusetts examined the spike in people declaring they had no religion that started in the 90s and found that while there are many factors contributing to it—dropping familial pressure, increased levels of college education—increased internet usage was likely a huge part of it, accounting for up to 25 percent of the decline in religious belief. While cautioning that correlation does not mean causation, Downey did go on to point out that since so many other factors were controlled for, it's a safe bet to conclude that the access to varied thought and debate the internet provides is persuading people to drop their religions.

But in the past few months, that hypothesis grew even stronger when a major American religion basically had to admit that internet arguments against their faith are putting them on their heels. The Church of Latter Day Saints has quietly released a series of essays, put together by church historians, addressing some of the less savory aspects of their history, such as the practice of polygamy or the ban on black members. The church sent out a memo in September telling church leaders to direct believers who have questions about their religion's history to these essays, which they presented as a counter to "detractors" who "spread misinformation and doubt". ...

While the memo sent to church leaders strongly implied that the websites that are bothering believers are full of disinformation, the likelier story is that they're worried about all the historically accurate information out there. The Mormons tend to be plagued more than other major churches by historically accurate information because they are a relatively new church and the historical records on their founders like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young are intact and hard to deny. ...

The internet generally gathered around President Obama for his recent comments endorsing an extremely strong version of net neutrality that would make it very difficult for corporate internet providers to give certain people preferential internet access over others. His comments were seen as a victory for political activists, everyday bloggers, and non-profits that would lose out on the ability to compete with moneyed corporations and other institutions in the free-for-all that is internet discourse. But atheists and critics of religion also win out with net neutrality. Giant, well-funded churches would probably love to pay for better access to your computer screen than any atheist blogger could afford, but if net neutrality becomes the law, they won't have that ability.

The Mormons might be the most obvious example of a church that has had to deal directly with non-believers using the internet to get unprecedented abilities to publicize their critiques of religion, but there's good reason to believe that the feedback religions are getting online is hurting other churches. Is it any coincidence that Pope Francis is undertaking the monumental task of trying to make the Catholic Church seem a little less forbidding in the age of the internet? ...

[T]he real threat to the faith is people making strong cases against the Catholic Church or religion in general. Some of those cases are boldly stated and some are more polite and accommodating, but either way they are real arguments and far more threatening to religion than some trolls saying stupid stuff that is best ignored.

It will be interesting to see how religions adapt to the fact that the internet makes it that much harder for them to control their believers' access to information. Some will probably be adaptable, like the Mormons, realizing that a little more information-sharing and transparency is the only way to keep trust alive. Others, like Pastor Mark Driscoll of the fundamentalist Mars Hill Church in Seattle, will react by doubling down, trying to convince their followers to stay off the internet rather than read persuasive cases against their beliefs. But the internet's beauty is it makes satisfying basic curiosity as easy as typing some words into a search bar. Odds are that's a temptation fewer and fewer believers will be able to resist.

CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALIST JOKE

Q: A Buddhist, a Hindu, a Sikh, a Mormon, a Jew and a Catholic all fall out of an airplane without parachutes. Which one hits the ground first?

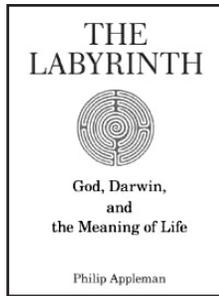
A.: Who cares? They're all going to Hell together.

LOOKING FOR HOLIDAY GIFTS? TRY THESE FROM SHSNY MEMBERS

Phillip Appleman

The Labyrinth: God, Darwin, and the Meaning of Life

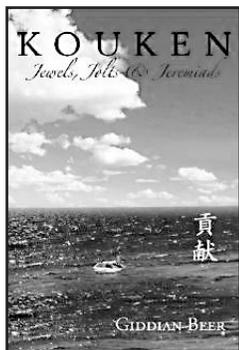
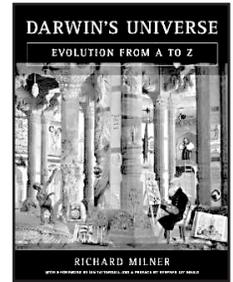
"In the face of greatness, one should not mince words. Philip Appleman's *The Labyrinth* is one of the most soaring, eloquent, and resoundingly humane essays I have ever been offered the privilege of publishing." (*Tom Flynn, editor, Free Inquiry*) "Philip Appleman distills into one short, delightful, beautifully written book vast libraries of wisdom, history, science, ethics, and philosophy." (*Edd Doerr, President, Americans for Religious Liberty*)
Hardcover: \$13.84 on Amazon



Richard Milner

Darwin's Universe: Evolution from A to Z

"... the single best volume ever published that covers all matters Darwinian from A to Z. I have never so enjoyed a scientific book, plucking out gems of elegant narrative richly supported by photographs and paintings from the history of evolutionary thought. A magnificent product of scholarship that is also a work of art." (*Michael Shermer, author of In Darwin's Shadow and Why Darwin Matters*). "All things Darwin, authoritative, amusing, abundantly illustrated, including some rare finds." (*Scientific American*)
Hardcover: \$44.58 on Amazon

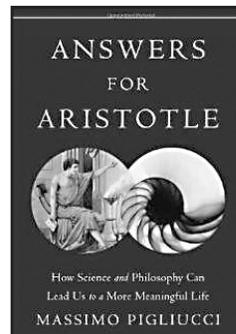


Giddian Beer

Kouken: Jewels, Jolts & Jeremiahs

"A wonderful, kaleidoscopic yin and yang popping out of Aladdin's lamp ... witty, exotic, funny, imaginative poetry, stories, essays ... take a vacation for the mind." (*Amazon reader review*) "Avoid this book if your beliefs are pre-digested media pap; otherwise dive right in for the sheer intellectual fun of real poetry and acerbic, often hilarious commentary." (*John Rafferty, President, SHSNY*)

Kindle: \$3.99; Paperback: \$2.97 on Amazon



Massimo Pigliucci

Answers for Aristotle: How Science and Philosophy Can Lead Us to a More Meaningful Life

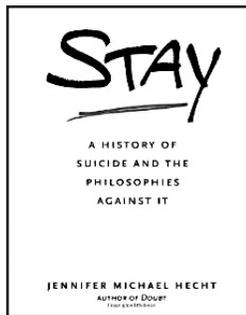
"Pigliucci is a singular bridge-builder, one who connects science as the investigation of what is with philosophy as reflection on what should be." (*Booklist*) "... a veritable Cook's Tour of science, philosophy, and the curious meeting ground of the two." (*Philosophy Now*)

Hardcover: \$19.78; Kindle: 15.39 on Amazon

Jennifer Michael Hecht

Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies Against It

"A history not only of suicide, but how we think about suicide. ... Hecht proposes her own argument against suicide in the secular, modern world, presenting a humanist call for life. ... Her final plea to the suicidal gives the book its title: she urges them to simply 'stay'." (*Thomas Flynn, The Daily Beast*) "Eloquent and affecting." (*David Brooks, New York Times*)
Hardcover: \$19.71; Paperback: \$12.16; Kindle: \$12.99;
Audio download: \$15.95 or Free on Amazon

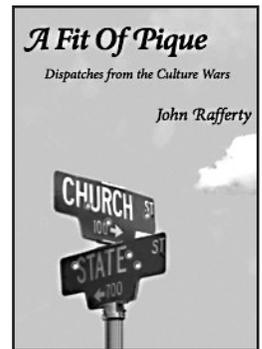


John Rafferty

A Fit of Pique: Dispatches from the Culture Wars

"Shades of Mencken ... witty and casually cultured essays by a leading freethinker on hate crimes, evolution, gay pride, the poetry of John Donne, Catholic schools, Jerry Falwell, the Sopranos, and, above all, the failures of organized religion." (*Norman Dorsen, past President, American Civil Liberties Union*)

Kindle: \$9.99; Paperback: \$16.20 on Amazon. Or \$16 from editor@shsn.org



And don't forget ...

PIQUE

Just \$30 buys the gift of a full year (11 issues) of the newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. Share your knowledge and enjoyment of humanism with the people who truly matter to you. Email editor@shsn.org or call 646-922-7389 (leave a call-back number).

And ...

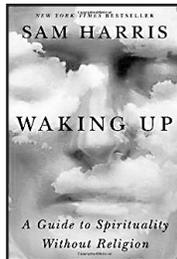
THE SECULAR HUMANIST SOCIETY OF NEW YORK

Your gift to SHSNY – a 501(c)3 educational non-profit – is 100 percent tax-deductible. So if you're in year-end, taxes-reducing, charitable-giving mode, seek no further – help the cause of humanism and reason in America, with a gift for SHSNY.

SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER 2014 - FEBRUARY 2015

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, DEC 4, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK
40 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)
 (Note new address: Church basement)
We'll discuss
WAKING UP:
A Guide to Spirituality
Without Religion
Sam Harris

Harris's new book is a guide to meditation as a rational spiritual practice informed by neuroscience and psychology. He argues that there are important truths to be found in those experiences and more to understanding reality than science and secular culture generally allow.



"Waking Up is for the twenty percent of Americans who follow no religion but who suspect that important truths can be found in the experiences of such figures as Jesus, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Rumi, and the other saints and sages of history. Harris, 'new atheist', neuroscientist and author of numerous bestsellers, argues that how we pay attention to the present moment largely determines the quality of our lives." – All formats.

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.

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

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MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsnny-org/

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@NY_Sec_Humanist

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, JAN 8, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
DOUBT: A HISTORY
The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation
Jennifer Michael Hecht

Yes, this is a *second* evening devoted to this marvelous book; the October Book Club wanted more time to explore its riches.

Join us even if you weren't at the October session, and join the discussion about doubt as one of the great intellectual traditions that distinguish the Western mind.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, FEB 5, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
FIELDS OF BLOOD:
Religion and the History of Violence
Karen Armstrong

Religion, Armstrong says, is not itself a source of violence, and the problem lies more deeply in "our human nature and the nature of the state", then goes on to make her point as she covers roughly 5,000 years of religious history, from Gilgamesh to the present day.
 – Hardcover, Kindle & Audiobook

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.

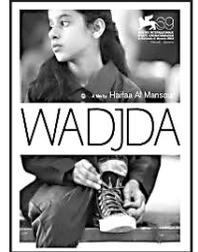
Brunch: Third Sunday
 at The Winslow

Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday
 at Stone Creek Lounge.

Studying Humanism: Last Monday
 at the Community Church of NY
 More info: www.shsnny.org,
 and/or 646-922-7389

MON, DEC 8, at 7:00 pm
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
WADJDA

Even though the very thought of a girl on a bike sends her family and her teachers into a panic, an enterprising Saudi girl (Wadjda) signs on for her school's Koran recitation competition as a way to raise the money she needs to buy the green bicycle she so determinedly wants.



A fascinating, delightful and award-winning film from a corner of the globe where cinema has been all but silenced.

After-Film Discussion:
Saudi mysogyny? How about ours?
SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
 (But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, DEC 21, NOON
CASUAL SUNDAY BRUNCH
New venue:

The Winslow Public House
243 East 14 St. (West of 2nd)

So Pullman Kitchen is under construction and Stag's Head continues to deafen with football, so let's try The Winslow. Good brunch menu from \$8-\$20 (add a Bloody Mary or Mimosa for just \$4), and a private back area where you can join 15-20 other freethinkers and humanists for fun and well-fed conversation.

After-Brunch Discussion: Do we celebrate the "holidays"? How?



SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER 2014 - FEBRUARY 2015

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE NOT DOING IN DECEMBER

Because of holiday scheduling conflicts, there will *not* be a *Great Lectures on DVD* evening in late December — *nor* will there be a meeting of the *Studying Humanism* study group.

Both will resume in January — promise.

Here's what we are doing: 4TH ANNUAL REASONABLE NEW YORK WINTER SOLSTICE PARTY, 2014 EDITION FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19, starting at 6:00pm at 49 GROVE

Join 100+ free-thinkers of all ages for a celebration of the Winter Solstice on Friday, December 19 at the upscale club 49 Grove in the West Village (at 49 Grove St., of course).



This annual event (last year was a smash success!) is hosted by Reasonable New York, the consortium of free-thinking, philosophical and secular social clubs and organizations (SHSNY is a founding member) based in NYC and surrounding areas.

It's an exciting evening of food, drink, dancing, and socializing ... and *admission to 49 Grove is free.*

Join us on the 19th and make new friends and connections with other inquisitive, intelligent and dogma-free New Yorkers — this is an annual event not to be missed!

SHSNY MEMBERS ARE ...

- *Through Sat, Dec 7, Remo Cosentino* will exhibit his new photography, "Light on Water: Views of the Gowanus Canal", at Espresso 7 Park Slope, 410 7th Ave., Brooklyn (13-14th Streets).
- *Sat, Dec 20, 4pm, Bob Murtha* and the New York City Community Chorus will perform a concert of eclectic holiday music at Holy Apostles Episcopal Church on the SE corner of 28th St and 9th Ave.

The high point of the afternoon will be the World Premier of an Anthem for the 20th Anniversary of the People's Chorus, music by Felix Mendelssohn from his *Gutenberg Cantata*, words by **Charlotte Pomerantz**, arranged by Thomas Garber. \$12 *suggested*.

NOTE: If you are a dues-paying member of SHSNY and *actively* and *personally* involved in an event open to the public, send your info to editor@shsnyc.org.

OTHER REASONABLE NEW YORK EVENTS

See the full RNY Calendar at www.reasonablenewyork.org

- *Drinking With Atheists:* Every Friday, fun and conversation. See meetup.com/GothamAtheists/
- *Feminist Freethinkers of NY:* Check feministfreethinkers.org
- *NY Society for Ethical Culture:*
 - Thu, Dec 2, 7pm, *The Islamic State & the Crisis in US Foreign Policy*, with Loretta Napoleoni and Chris Hedges, moderator Ted Rall. Tickets \$10 @ <https://sevenstories.eventbrite.com>, \$15 at the door. (No one turned away.)
 - Sun, Dec 7, 2 pm, *Sunday Assembly-NYC*. Free. An hour of engaging speakers, toe-tapping songs, socializing, coffee and cookies.

PLUS

Agnostic A.A.: Fifteen weekly AA-endorsed meetings in four boros (not Queens). Info at agnosticAA NYC.org/meetings.html
Atheism History Week — With SHSNY's John Rafferty, 5:30 p.m. every Wed, MNN Ch. 1997 in Manhattan, and live streaming anywhere at www.mnn.org.
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Come gather with your fellow (and sororal) NYC free-thinkers at "the Cote Basque of Chinese restaurants" to celebrate the 206th birthday of Charles Darwin and the 27th Anniversary of the founding of SHSNY.

Highlights of the Evening:

- 13-Course Chinese Banquet (yes, lots of vegetarian choices)
- Election & Presentation of the 11th Annual SHSNY Dumbth Award
 - Guest Speaker & Video Presentation: Darwin Scholar/Entertainer Richard Milner

Cost of the evening, all-inclusive, is just \$45 per person (cash bar).

Book early (by Feb 5) and save 10% - just \$40/pp. Prepay (credit card or PayPal) at www.shsnyc.org. Or mail your check to SHSNY, PO Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-7661.

Questions? Call 646-922-7389 (leave a callback number).

BRITTANY MAYNARD: "I HAVE CHOSEN ..."

John Rafferty

Brittany Maynard, who at the age of 29 was suffering from terminal brain cancer and who became the public face of the controversial right-to-die movement, ended her own life – as she planned – on November 1, at her home in Portland, Oregon. In her last post, she wrote ...

"Goodbye to all my dear friends and family that I love. Today is the day I have chosen to pass away with dignity in the face of my terminal illness, this terrible brain cancer that has taken so much from me ... but would have taken so much more."

There is suicide, and there is death with dignity. A young woman with a no-doubt-about-it death sentence made a conscious and rational decision that she did not want to become a drooling, pain-racked and medicated zombie in her final days. As Ms. Maynard posted earlier:

"For people to argue against this choice for sick people really seems evil to me. They try to mix it up with suicide, and that's really unfair, because there's not a single part of me that wants to die. But I am dying."

Ms. Maynard's choice was not the same as that of someone ducking responsibility or shame or bankruptcy court by going out the window. Our own Jennifer Michael Hecht, in her brilliant new book, *Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies Against It* (see page 5), has made clear the disastrous societal ripple effects of suicide. But the outrage over Ms. Maynard's act spewed by religious fundamentalists all around the world is simply their knee-jerk reaction to yet a further shrinking of the sphere of human activity in which they get to play a meaningful part.

My own reaction? I wish I'd known Brittany Maynard; hers was a short life, but one well and meaningfully lived.

DENNIS MIDDLEBROOKS WEIGHS IN AT THE NEW YORK POST

To the Editor: The Vatican's top bioethics official has labeled the suicide of Brittany Maynard, the American woman who was suffering from terminal brain cancer, as "reprehensible".

Monsignor Ignacio Carasco de Paula, the head of the Pontifical Academy of Life asserted that "dignity is something other than putting an end to one's life". He added, "Maynard's act is in itself reprehensible, but what happens in the consciousness we do not know." He concluded, "the gesture in and of itself should be condemned."

The article did not indicate whether Carasco de Paula was suffering from a painful terminal illness himself.

WHOSE "RIGHT TO DIE"? MINE! YOURS!

John Rafferty

Having covered the subject of Brittany Maynard's death quite thoroughly, on November 12 *The New York Times* turned to the larger – and even more controversial – subject of "the right to die".

The Times published a letter from one Joyce Appleby, urging the right to what she called "prophylactic suicide:

the decision of an elderly person to pre-empt the grim reaper and avoid the disabilities of extended life". *The Times* offered readers and "Invitation to a Dialogue: Choosing When to Die". They didn't publish this from me:

To the Editor: What rational argument can be advanced against the considered decision of a rational individual who is approaching the natural and inescapable end of life to end that life on his or her own terms? As an active and (still relatively) healthy 81 year-old who hopes to live many more (relatively healthy) years – and a humanist with no concern for what Hamlet calls "the dread of something after death" – my only fear of death is that it will take too long in coming, arriving only after I have been reduced, by Alzheimer's or whatever other dementia, to an infantile shell of a human being and an expensive burden on my family and society.

Rather, I hope to make my own choice, while I am still consciously able, to go out with dignity.

BARNEY FRANK ON FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT (AND A LITTLE ABOUT THE RIGHT TO DIE)

Barney Frank

(Excerpted from "How to Achieve Equality? Talk to Your Members of Congress!", his speech on accepting the 2014 Humanist of the Year Award, as reported in The Humanist Magazine, 10/21/2014)

I was semi-joking when I told Bill Maher that I'm a pot-smoking atheist. I wouldn't really describe myself as an atheist. Atheism expresses more certainty than I have. My actual attitude is that if it's absolutely unknowable, don't bother me with it. So the question is, how do nonbelievers achieve equality? Well, it depends on how you frame it.

I just wrote a memoir. One of the things I recounted in it was a very important situation in the United States that we should talk more about and let people draw the implications of. It's the Terri Schiavo case. I was sitting in my apartment in Newton, Massachusetts, in 2005 (I think it was Easter, which I suppose was appropriate for people who thought Congress could bring her back from the dead), when we got a summons to Washington. We were to vote on a bill by which Congress would override the decisions of every level of court in Florida and basically compel the hospital to ignore the wishes of Schiavo's husband to allow her to die, which, he said, without contradiction, had been her wish. Not to euthanize, but just to remove the feeding tube.

I should add that Senator Bill Frist (R-TN), a very eminent heart surgeon who was then trying to get the Republican nomination for president, said that he had been watching Terri Schiavo on television and he could tell that she was making eye contact, a rather bizarre diagnosis. It turned out that she had long since lost any brain function. Her eyes were not connected to anything; there was nothing going on there.

But here's what happened after we were summoned to Washington. The Senate had voted on the bill earlier, and it passed unanimously. We took the bill up in the House and

some of us fought it. Under the procedure that requires a two-thirds vote, it got 300-something yesses to sixty noes. A lot of members ducked the vote. By the way, it was one of the best debates in recent times for one very simple reason: it happened on a Sunday. Members were summoned to Washington and nobody had time to get their staffers to write a speech. So the members actually had to get up and talk to each other.

Of course, the argument was essentially a religious one: How dare human beings interpose between this woman and God? God will decide when she is taken. I later debated that on television with one advocate who said that even if it was clear that Schiavo wanted to be allowed to die, that was wrong. The man who made that argument so vigorously was Pat Boone. (Somebody said, "That was kinda weird, you were debating Pat Boone," and someone else said, "Yeah, well it was better than listening to the two of them sing.")

We had the perception in Congress that the theistic side was overwhelmingly popular. Three Republicans voted no out of a couple hundred, and half the Democrats voted for the bill. A number of them came up to me on the floor (I was the floor manager) and said, "You're right but I'm afraid of this." I figured I was on the wrong side politically, but I wasn't worried about it in my district.

We went home that night thinking the American public was going to be very critical of those of us who voted to allow Schiavo's husband to order the hospital to remove the feeding tube from this brain-dead, inert life form.

To the contrary, the country exploded in rage at those who had voted for the bill. There have been two times in my life when I was thanked walking on the streets by strangers for something I had done in Congress. (The only previous time was when I helped forestall the impeachment of Bill Clinton.) I had people stop me and say, "Let me understand this. Those jerks are going to tell me what I should do if my mother gets sick? They're going to tell my kids how to respond to me?" There was an explosion of anger on the part of the American people. It ended Bill Frist's presidential campaign.

Now, I cite that case because it suggests our job is easier than you might think: it's to connect the dots. It's not to change attitudes, it's to connect them. That notion, that there was a religious obligation to intervene in human affairs, angered most of the American people. You've got to show people what the implications are of the view that religion should govern our public affairs, as opposed to being merely a personal guide. The public is on our side on this, increasingly.

Now the question is: how best to do this? In the first place, as I said, rancor can be fun, but forgo it. I understand you get nasty emails. But you know what? I never heard of an email that read itself to you. Just ignore them! Delete them! Pay them no attention. The only thing that made me regret retiring was that the biggest jerks would be happy. Remember Franklin Roosevelt on the economic royalists? "They hate me, and I welcome their hate." That may not

sound nice, but that's an appropriate response to that fringe.

But with the others, let me put it this way: you have a scale, one-two-three-four-five. The one is with you. The five is against you. The two is leaning your way, the four is leaning the other way, and the three is in the middle. When we get together, priority goes to the threes and twos. If you have any time left over you go for the fours. You ignore the fives. If you are campaigning and you're going door to door and someone says you're terrible, you say goodnight. Focus on the people who are open to persuasion and don't insult them. Don't insult their religion. It's just counterproductive.

I have a rule for people that I developed out of the LGBT political movement, but it applies to other movements as well. If you have a political cause that is very important to you, and you are asked to join in an activity that is great fun and makes you feel wholly engaged and warm, and you are in solidarity with those who agree with you, you are almost certainly not helping. You are engaged in a kind of massive reinforcement. I'm not criticizing preaching to the converted, by the way. I'm preaching, I hope, to the converted who believe in promoting the argument that whether or not someone is a theist is irrelevant. It's irrelevant to whether they are someone who can be trusted, whether they should be hired or voted for. I think we are arguing for the irrelevance of people's own personal religious views and doing that in a way that is respectful of religious views. I think if we do it that way we win.

Implicitly, the American people rejected the theistic approach and embraced the humanist approach in the Terri Schiavo case, and in every other case. You know, everybody tells people, "Sign a healthcare proxy! Sign what you want to do!" You don't hear them say, "Do what God would want you to do in this case." Right?

Let's remember that part of humanism is respecting and being nice to people. So as you meet individuals, given the atmosphere in which they've grown up, given what they've been subjected to, don't hold it against them; it's not their fault they're religious. I'm serious. Find the common ground that I think exists, build on that, and we'll get somewhere.

A POSTSCRIPT (IMPORTED) TO LAST MONTH'S ELECTION

The following is an "Open Letter to America" that ran in several Canadian newspapers and has since gone viral around the internet and the world.

You Americans Have No Idea

Just How Good You Have It With Obama

Many of us Canadians are confused by the U.S. midterm elections. Consider, right now in America, corporate profits are at record highs, the country's adding 200,000 jobs per month, unemployment is below 6 percent, U.S. gross national product growth is the best of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. The dollar is at its strongest levels in years, the stock market is near record highs, gasoline prices are falling, there's no inflation, interest rates are the lowest in 30 years, U.S. oil imports are declining, U.S. oil production is

rapidly increasing, the deficit is rapidly declining, and the wealthy are still making astonishing amounts of money.

America is leading the world once again and respected internationally – in sharp contrast to the Bush years. Obama brought soldiers home from Iraq and killed Osama bin Laden.

So, Americans vote for the party that got you into the mess that Obama just dug you out of? This defies reason.

When you are done with Obama, could you send him our way? – Richard Brunt, Victoria, British Columbia

(Comment: For those readers who disagree with, or are confused by the above, "Canada" is the very large country immediately to our north. – JR)

AND ANOTHER IMPORTED ELECTION IDEA

John Rafferty

(Thanks to Deeya Pavelle for forwarding on Facebook.)

In Norway, elections are 74 percent government funded, political advertising on TV and radio is banned, and voter turnout is 81 percent – ranked 15th highest in the world.

In the U.S., elections are 80 percent funded by corporations and the super-wealthy, much of it for negative TV and radio advertising, and voter turnout is 48 percent – ranked 120th out of 169 countries.

SID FINEHIRSH ANSWERS HIS CRITICS

Iwant to thank Basha Weiss and Donna Marxer ("Readers Respond", *PIQUE*, November) for their thoughtful response to my article, "On Islamophobia and *PIQUE*" (*PIQUE*, October). But, of course, I think they missed the point. Most importantly, I do not defend Islam or make any excuses for Jihadism. I denounce all religions as benighted and condemn any belief system that justifies attacks on innocent individuals.

I don't believe in moral relativism ("political correctness") in either contemporary culture or in historic geographic terms. But that's the point – despicable behavior is what despicable individuals and groups do. It is a false generalization to extend that condemnation of Jihadist terrorists to 1.6 billion Muslims.

If we agree that Islamic society has shown a high degree of toleration and advancement of arts and sciences in the past, to what do we attribute that? Those societies followed the very same prophet, read the very same Koran and practiced the very same religion that we see today. So what is different?

Obviously, the main difference is the geopolitical situation. Islam of past centuries was expanding, triumphant, prosperous and confident enough to take advantage of the talents within the Ummah, as well as within its subject populations. Religion had little to do with its achievements – then or now! – e.g., consider the contributions of Allah-Rakha Rahman, Shirin Ebadi, Aasif Mandvi, Ahmed Zewail, and my favorite Bollywood star, Shah Rukh Khan, or "10 American Muslim Women You Should Know" (Huffpost.com).

As atheists, we are direct beneficiaries of the

Enlightenment, but we should bear in mind that it was post-Rousseau France that invaded Algeria in 1830 and deliberately drowned hundreds of Algerian independence supporters in the Seine in 1961. It was post-Hume England that took over Egypt in 1882. It was post-Kant Germany that occupied East Africa after aiming battleship guns on the Sultan's palace in 1885. And it was England again that slaughtered thousands of Iraqis in 1921, with a follow-up by post-Franklin America slaughtering tens of thousands more in 2003-10. Are any of these atrocities less criminal because they were justified for reasons of ideology rather than reason of religion? Is it mere coincidence that after a century of European (read Christian) domination of the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928?

The extension of our justified damnation of violent Islamist Jihadists to all Muslims is the same type of generalization that put Japanese-Americans into camps during World War II. It is the moral equivalent of the current Ebola panic, where a threat of medical pathology is replaced by a threat of a geopolitical pathology in order to fan xenophobia by the likes of Fox News. In truth, Islamophobia is nothing more than simple bigotry and needs to be opposed, particularly by atheists who profess to know something about logic and history.

Re Ayaan Hirsi Ali: persecution for one's belief is no proof of one's argument. If that was true, we would all be followers of St. Ignatius of Antioch.

WHY YOU CAN'T RECONCILE GOD AND EVOLUTION: Part 2

Greta Christina

("Excerpted from "4 reasons that 'God made evolution happen' makes no sense", on AlterNet.com, 7/31/2014)

Editor: In the first half of this essay [PIQUE, November] Ms. Christina argued that the cop-out notion among some people that "God made evolution happen" is nonsense, "rife with both internal contradictions and denial of the evidence". She points out that: "1) It contradicts a central principle of the theory of evolution" (that there is no direction in evolution) and "2) There's not a scrap of evidence for it." She continues ...

3. There's a whole lot of evidence against it.

Sinuses. Blind spots. External testicles. Backs and knees and feet shoddily warped into service for bipedal animals. Human birth canals barely wide enough to let the baby's skull pass – and human babies born essentially premature, because if they stayed in utero any longer they'd kill their mothers coming out (which they sometimes do anyway). Wind pipes and food pipes in close proximity, leading to a great risk of choking to death when we eat. Impacted wisdom teeth, because our jaws are too small for all our teeth. Eyes wired backwards and upside-down. The vagus nerve, wandering all over hell and gone before it gets where it's going. The vas deferens, ditto. Brains wired with imprecise language, flawed memory, fragile mental health, shoddy cost-benefit analysis, poor understanding of probability, and a strong tendency to prioritize immediate

satisfaction over long-term gain. Birth defects. 15-20 percent of confirmed pregnancies ending in miscarriage (and that's just confirmed pregnancies – about 30 percent of all pregnancies end in miscarriage, and as many as 75 percent of all conceptions miscarry).

And that's just humans. Outside the human race, you've got giraffes with a vagus nerve traveling ten to fifteen feet out of its way to get where it's going. You've got sea mammals with lungs but no gills. You've got male spiders depositing their sperm into a web, siphoning it up with a different appendage, and only then inseminating their mates – because their inseminating appendage isn't connected to their sperm factory. (To wrap your mind around this: Imagine that humans had penises on their foreheads, and to reproduce they squirted semen from their testes onto a table, picked up the semen with their head-penises, and then had sex.)

You've got kangaroo molars, which wear out and get replaced – but only four times, after which the animals starve to death. You've got digger wasps laying their eggs in the living bodies of caterpillars – and stinging said caterpillars to paralyze them but not kill them, so the caterpillars die a slow death and can nourish the wasps' larvae with their living bodies.

You're going to look at all this and tell me it was engineered this way on purpose?

Yes, there are many aspects of biological life that astonish with their elegance and function. But there are many other aspects of biological life that astonish with their clumsiness, half-assedness, inefficiency, pointless superfluties, glaring omissions, laughable failures, "fixed that for you" kluges and jury-rigs, and appalling, mind-numbing brutality. If you're trying to reconcile all this with a powerfully magical creator god who made it this way on purpose, it requires wild mental contortions at best, and a complete denial of reality at worst.

On the other hand, it is very easy to reconcile all this with an entirely natural theory of evolution. In fact, according to the theory of evolution, it would be hugely surprising if biological life didn't turn out this way. Again: Evolution proceeds one generation at a time. Each generation is only very slightly different from the generation that preceded it. It makes perfect sense that biological life would consist of awkward, inefficient, ad-hoc adaptations to forms that no longer exist.

And at the risk of anthropomorphizing: Evolution doesn't care if you're comfortable. Evolution doesn't care if you're happy. Evolution doesn't need you to be perfect: it just needs you to be better than your competitors, your predators, and your prey. Evolution cares if you survive, and produce fertile offspring that also survive. Actually, even that's not exactly true. Evolution doesn't care if you live or die. If you die, something else lives. Evolution doesn't give a damn who it is.

Evolution doesn't give a damn about any of this. But God supposedly does. So why did he do it this way? If God

is so powerful that he could bring all of existence into being simply by wishing it; if he's so powerful that he can tinker with the genetics and circumstances of evolution simply by wishing it – why would he wish it to be so clumsy, half-assed, inefficient, jury-rigged, superfluous, and brutal?

4. If it were true, God would either be incompetent or malicious.

Here's the thing about evolution. Evolution has led to some truly wondrous, truly amazing forms of life. (Or, to be more precise: Evolution has led to human brains that are capable of the experience of amazement, and that are inclined to be amazed at the variety and complexity of biological life.)

But evolution is messy. Evolution is wildly inefficient. See #3 above. It's not just the products of evolution that are inefficient, either. The process itself is inefficient – inherently so, almost by definition. If you're an all-powerful magical being trying to create sentient life, evolution is the long, long, long way around. If you're trying to get from Point A to Point B, evolution is a slow, meandering walk down convoluted dirt roads, with thousands of stops on the way to visit your doddering uncles who never shut up.

And evolution is brutal. It's not just that the results of the process are often uncomfortable, frustrating, even painful. The process itself is inherently brutal. The process ensures that most animals die in dreadful suffering and terror: they die from starvation, from injury, from disease, from birth defects, from being torn to pieces and devoured by other animals. Of all the billions upon billions of conscious living beings that have ever existed, an infinitesimal minority got to die peacefully in their beds surrounded by their families. The overwhelming majority died brutally, in pain and fear. And that includes the ones who actually won the evolution sweepstakes, and got to live long enough to reproduce with fertile offspring.

If there were a god who was using evolution to direct life in the direction he wanted, it immediately begs the question: Why? Why on earth would anyone do this?

If God were powerful enough to magically tinker with the process of evolution, in undetectable ways entirely indistinguishable from natural cause and effect – why wouldn't he be powerful enough to just "whoosh" humanity into existence? If God were smart enough to know precisely how to set the parameters of existence so that billions of years later it would unfold into conscious human life – why wouldn't he be smart enough to do it in a way that avoided the inefficient, hideously violent processes through which evolution has unfolded, and continues to unfold?

If theistic evolution were true – if there really were a god who either tinkers with evolution to create human life or who set the universe in motion knowing that evolution would eventually result in human life – then that god would either be grossly incompetent or cruelly malicious. That god would have to be either incapable of using the system of evolution to create life efficiently and with minimal pain – indeed, incapable of coming up with a better system for

producing life in the first place – or brutally callous to the great suffering he has caused for hundreds of millions of years, and that he continues to cause on a daily basis.

Is that really the god you believe in?

A For Effort, F for Execution

I understand the desire to reconcile science with religion. I really do. People have a lot of reasons to be religious – community, family identity, cultural identity, an attachment to the ritual, a built-in sense of meaning and purpose, a desire to believe that the creator of all time and space personally cares about you, a desire to believe in an afterlife. And I definitely understand the desire to accept science: as flawed as it is, science has repeatedly shown itself to be the best method we have for understanding reality.

I understand that people want their religion to reflect reality. But there is no religion that reflects reality. If you want to accept reality in general, and the reality of evolution in particular, you need to accept that.

A FINAL NOTE ON “THE WAR ON CHRISTMAS”

Jon Stewart

Yes, the long war on Christianity. I pray that one day we may live in an America where Christians can worship freely! In broad daylight! Openly wearing the symbols of their religion ... perhaps around their necks? And maybe – dare I dream it? – maybe one day there can be an openly Christian President. Or, perhaps, 43 of them. Consecutively.

SERIOUSLY, IN NEW YORK, IN THE 21ST CENTURY

(Based on and excerpted from a post by Arturo Garcia on RawStory.com, 11/6/2014)

Pastor James Manning of the ATLAH Worldwide Missionary Church in Harlem claimed last month that the Starbucks coffee chain was taking semen from “sodomites” and putting it in their lattes.

“My suspicion is that they’re getting this semen from sodomites,” he said on his online radio show. “That’s what my suspicion is. My suspicion is that semen, like cord blood [*Ed: WTF?*], has millions and millions of little zygotes in it, and it flavors up the coffee. And it makes you think you’re having a good time drinking that cup of latte with the semen in it.”

Even after being told that the “report” on which he based his nonsensical claim was a hoax, the rabidly anti-LGBT minister ranted on.

“Starbucks will be found to be perverting its customers and perverting human sexuality. As if drinking Starbucks is some sort of a sacrificial ritual bath where they kill the innocent babies and drink their blood in some of these meetings that are had by these fraternal or sorority groups.

“Starbucks has, for years, been using sexual fluids to prosper at their businesses, and the truth is now coming out.”

Comment: Speaking of “coming out”, exactly how do you know that semen “flavors up” lattes, pastor? – JR

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