

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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May, 2017

## SHSNY 10th ANNUAL DAY OF REASON BRUNCH - Page 7

We lead with exhortations on acceptance, kindness, and compassion, then hear from an historian on humanism, a physicist on atheism, a skeptic on truth, and a UK cousin on terrorism and Islam. We nominate four more Board members and three new Dumbths, consider Xian hypocrisy, and *trumpet* the discovery of a certain *presi* insect with a hairy yellow top and itty-bitty mothballs. – JR

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### ACCEPTANCE: THE HUMANIST ATTITUDE TOWARD TRANSGENDER PERSONS

Jessica Dapson

**A** cceptance. Protection. Equal Access. These are three rights, in addition to basic respect, that members of the transgender community – including non-binary individuals<sup>1</sup> – seek to be guaranteed by law. Discrimination and bigotry create hurdles and hoops for almost every LGBTQ person. Humanists typically stand united in support for folks in this community – folks who live life as they desire, and in a way that does no harm either to them or others.

Do you still struggle with what it means to be transgender? Find it all a little confusing still? Mystified by the acronyms? AMAB or AFAB. MTF or FTM. Blockers and binders. Here is a little help with these acronyms and words that are common jargon in the transgender community but confusing at first to others. AMAB stands for assigned-male-at-birth, and AFAB assigned female-at-birth. MTF is male-to-female and FTM is female-to-male. But then there is intersex, a topic for another essay, although certainly important. So, if you are chatting with a dad of a transgender son, he may tell you, “Well, Sam was actually assigned-female-at-birth, which is why Samantha is the name on her birth certificate. Believe it or not, she is not the only FTM ninth grader in our district.”

When a person experiences gender dysphoria at a young age, there is time for “blockers”, drugs which are prescribed to “pause” puberty. So, kids who are AMAB, but identify as female, don’t have to go through male puberty (which is likely undesired), and kids who are AFAB, but identify as male, are spared from female puberty. “Blockers” provide time to think and decide. Most parents agree to blockers because their doctors assure them they are safe and, if need be, reversible. If blockers are discontinued, puberty

generally begins as if never paused. Once these kids reach teen age, doctors typically monitor them year after year until hormone therapy is recommended. For transgender girls, this would be doses of estrogen, and for boys testosterone. Parents and doctors usually proceed with the child’s best interest in mind. When it comes to GCS (gender confirmation surgery), some decide to have it and some do not. But while name change may occur on the birth certificate at any time, gender marker stays put until the individual is 18 years old. Gender is no longer dependent upon surgery, but rather just a physician’s statement confirming treatment. Also, a big change has occurred regarding birth certificates for those residing in New York City: intersex is now an available gender marker<sup>2</sup>.

New York is, proudly, one of the more progressive states, and supportive policy already exists<sup>3</sup> for transgender students in our public schools. Last fall, in hopes of curbing homelessness, Humanists of Buffalo joined a league of other groups under the direction of the American Humanist Association (AHA) to provide LGBTQ-friendly transitional housing spaces. Roy Speckhardt, Executive Director of the AHA said, of the program dubbed Humanists Optimizing and Upholding Shelter Equality (HOUSE),

*“Humanists have long been ahead of the curve in affirming gender non-conforming individuals. Now we are turning that support into coordinated action that exemplifies the humanist values of equality, justice, and human dignity while taking a stand against religiously-motivated discrimination that harms the LGBTQ community.”*

However, New York is still struggling to make equality a legal protection. Despite being passed for the tenth time, the fate of GENDA (the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act) is once again is up in the NYS Senate. Year after year, the senate has failed to bring this bill to the

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floor for a vote. Our state has just eleven cities and towns that prohibit discrimination against individuals because of their gender identity or expression—we can do better.

Passing GENDA is on the hearts and minds of transgender NYers, their allies, and parents of transgender children. Assemblymember Harry Bronson (D-Rochester/Chili/Henrietta), who helped GENDA pass the Assembly, said:

*“No matter who you are or what you look like, who you love or where you come from, everyone has the right to a life of respect and dignity without fear. Particularly right now, we must take a strong stand against discrimination and oppression of all kinds.”*

What does life look like for transgender NYers without GENDA? Well, if you are a kindergartener at a public school, you probably can be acknowledged by your preferred name and pronouns, and use the bathroom\* designated for the gender you identify with. If you want to marry, it is likely that no venue will turn you down based on the ruling in *Liberty Ridge Farm v. NYS*. But housing and state-funded health insurance remain a serious and important concern until GENDA becomes law. Carmelita Cruz, Housing Works Director of NY Policy, says, “[GENDA] creates a clear defined law, eliminating any legal ambiguity. ... [GENDA] sends a strong message that New York will not accept discrimination against any of its citizens.” We are in the 21st century, yet many NYers, including teachers, police officers, and even doctors, aren’t familiar with what it means to be transgender.

Beyond seeking knowledge and accepting transgender individuals, what can Humanists in New York do?

Activists will **gather** on Tuesday, May 2, from 9:00 AM to 4:30 PM in Albany (register at footnote 4)<sup>4</sup> to **meet** with NYS legislators, **participate** in a Town Hall where attendees will learn how they can help pass the transgender civil rights legislation known as GENDA. **Connect** at a Town Hall: **find** a local advocacy group that is pushing the Senate to bring GENDA to the floor. I recommend the Long Island Transgender Advocacy Coalition (LITAC)<sup>5</sup>, TransPAC<sup>6</sup>, and the New York Transgender Advocacy Group<sup>7</sup>, but there are others. **Join and help** transgender NYers gain acceptance.

Nathaniel Branden said it best, “The first step toward change is awareness. The second step is acceptance.” Help spread awareness so they may gain acceptance.

1 <http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/>

2 <http://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/nations-first-known-intersex-birth-certificate-issued-nyc-n701186>

3 <http://www.nysed.gov/Press/Transgender-and-Gender-Non-conforming-Students-Guidance-Document>

4 <https://www.cvent.com/c/express/12dfbbad-84cc-4b8b-90da-23883e6d1280>

5 <https://www.facebook.com/LITransAdvocates/>

6 <https://transpac.nationbuilder.com/>

7 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/OfficialNYTAG/>

\***Comment:** *I have only one minor quibble with this otherwise excellent, timely, and useful article: Why the hell can't Americans say "toilet"? - JR*

## SMALL ACTS

Claire Miller

**A**midtown #6 train subway staircase at rush hour isn't the easiest to navigate for even we privileged, able-bodied white middle-class citizens, and I witnessed about 50 of these suits grumble as they moved out of the way for my new superhero. The young African-American man maneuvered down those steps with the grace of a *premier danseur* of the New York Ballet, carrying the front half of the baby carriage for a Muslim woman, in full *hajib*. Once she was safely down the stairs, he turned around and bounded back up. It was evident that he was helping a random stranger in distress. At a loss for words (as I seldom am), I simply applauded. Regaining my speech, I exclaimed, “You’re a man of honor.” He replied, “That’s just what I do. I have a daughter of my own.” I replied, “She will grow up well.”

A few days later, I was riding a bus when I witnessed a harried immigrant mother with an adorable five-year-old, and a ragamuffin of a 13-year-old who was acting out. The five-year-old was behaving so well, and was getting all her mother’s attention, while the 13-year-old, wearing thick glasses that only partially hid her afflicted eye, took grapes and spit them back in the bowl, pushed her sister out of her seat, and did everything else she could to get her mother’s attention. I could see what was going on: she was probably being bullied at school; she came home where her sister was the baby doll who stole the show; there was no place in which she could be special and feel loved.

It was lucky for me that I was dressed up and wearing makeup that day. As I got off the bus, I tapped on her shoulder, and whispered to her, “Stay strong, I’ve been there. It does get better, trust me.” As the bus pulled away, I gave her a strong thumbs-up salute. She had her nose pushed against the window and was waving joyfully; that smile will live on in my memory for a long time.

Although I hate smarmy movies like “Pay It Forward”, there are always small acts we can do to help the people around us. Whether it’s lifting that cart over the pothole, or giving directions, or even just a smile, it’s what keeps society going. And it’s especially important now, in this political climate, especially for those who are being targeted for much worse treatment. It’s up to us to glue up the cracks that are forming.

**T**he best portion of a good man’s life is his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.

– William Wordsworth

## HAVE I RAISED MY SONS TO BE TOO GOOD?

Jonathan Engel

**I** have two sons, ages 28 and 24. Both of them have disabilities. My older son is on the autistic spectrum, and my younger son has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. They are both fine young men, but they both have a kind of aloofness, or diffidence that can be traced to their

respective disabilities. My wife and I have therefore taken efforts to make sure that they engage appropriately with the outside world. This is all part and parcel of our desire to raise our sons as caring, empathetic humanists. I've tried to emphasize to them both that they should not ignore fellow human beings in need, in ways both small and big. I've told them, for example, that when they see a person who is obviously visually impaired trying to cross the street, offer to help. In such small acts of kindness we make ourselves better people and we make the world a better place, which to me is our purpose in life.

But I don't want them to be chumps. You still have to protect yourself from being taken advantage of. I thought of this recently with a couple of incidents involving my sons. My younger son has a Masters degree in journalism, and has been working part-time/freelance while he looks for something more permanent. About six weeks ago he received an offer for an unpaid internship with a small journalism start-up. Since it looked like a good opportunity to join in the growth of a new company he decided to take it, even though it would start out unpaid. But the company was really slow in sending him his initial paperwork, and even though he completed it and sent it back to them in short order, he has not heard anything from them since. In the meantime he found another part-time gig that would probably preclude him from taking the first offer, assuming he ever hears from them again. So against this backdrop he said to me "I guess I should call the first company and tell them that I can't take the internship". Interestingly enough, I think he believed that I would have an expectation that he would do this, as I'm always advising him to "do the right thing". Say what? I told him, in effect, that if he never hears from them again none of this will matter, and if he does, he'll have the option of taking what's offered or not, depending on his circumstances and wishes. And I added, "They're the ones who have disappeared on you; you owe them nothing."

A few days later I heard my older son engaged in a long phone conversation. After listening for a while, I figured out that he was on the phone with a telemarketer. After hearing him hem and haw for a few minutes I asked him who he was on the phone with, and he told me. I asked him if he had any interest in the product being hawked (it turns out it was a medical alert button; he's 28 and in good health) and he said no. So I told him: "Right now, say no thanks and then hang up." He did, but then asked me if that wasn't being rude. No, I said, what was rude was them cold-calling you and wasting your time trying to sell you a service that you neither need nor want. Sheesh!

I know that my wife and I are partly responsible for this, what with our emphasis on being polite, caring and decent, and always doing "the right thing". It's an essential element of making yourself a better person and making the world a better place. But it's still okay to look after your own interests.

As Hillel the Elder said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" So it's all a bit of a balancing act and a work in progress. It's possible to be a kind, caring and compassionate

person and still not allow yourself to be taken advantage of. At least I think and hope so. Like my sons and everyone else, I'm still working on it.

## **HUMANISM vs. RELIGION: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?**

**Yuval Noah Harari**

*(In March PIQUE, an article by member Walter Balcerak criticized historian Yuval Harari for equating humanism with religion in his masterful book on the history of humankind, Sapiens. Below is Professor Harari's gracious and thoughtful response.)*

I equate ideologies and religions, because from a historical perspective, they fulfill the same function - they give super-human legitimacy to human institutions, norms and laws. If you find this unacceptable, you are of course free to make a distinction between god-fearing religions and godless ideologies. I just don't find God to be very important. Humans make history, humans make religions, and humans make ideologies. Whether humans insert a god into a story or not matters less than the function the story fulfills.

My treatment of humanism discounts what you define as secular humanism, for similar reasons. I am interested in the historical impact of ideas rather than in the ideas per se. Perhaps secular humanism does not sanctify humans. But the humanist movements that had a big impact on history did sanctify humans. Perhaps secular humanism recognizes only the authority of science. But the humanist ethical codes that had a big impact on history did not rely exclusively on scientific research. There was no scientific basis in 1776 to claim that all humans are equal, or that they all have "rights". As far as I know, there has never been any scientific definition or basis for the notion of "rights".

You can object to killing people in various ways. Some people say that you shouldn't kill because God said so. Some say you shouldn't kill because it violates human rights. Some say you shouldn't kill because it causes suffering. The explanation you give is very important, because it has many consequences. If you don't kill just because God said so, then if God tells you to kill somebody - like a heretic - you would kill the heretic. If you don't kill because it violates human rights, then you'd find nothing wrong with killing animals that have no human rights. If you don't kill because it causes suffering, you would avoid killing heretics and animals as well. That's just the tip of the iceberg, of course.

In any case, I have treated humanism from a historical perspective, focusing on the currents of humanist thought that had a profound impact on politics, economics and society. Secular humanism as you define it may be superior to other currents of humanism from an ethical and philosophical perspective, but to the best of my historical knowledge, it was less influential than Liberalism and Socialism. Truth and influence don't always go together. Silly stories may convince billions, while the truth enjoys just a tiny following.

But then the question is what you want in life - power or truth?

## ALL SCIENTISTS SHOULD BE MILITANT ATHEISTS

Lawrence Krauss

(Excerpted from *The New Yorker*, 9/8/2015, and reprinted in the newsletter of the Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society, April, 2017)

As a physicist, I do a lot of writing and public speaking about the remarkable nature of our cosmos, primarily because I think science is a key part of our cultural heritage and needs to be shared more broadly. Sometimes, I refer to the fact that religion and science are often in conflict; from time to time, I ridicule religious dogma. When I do, I sometimes get accused in public of being a “militant atheist”. Even a surprising number of my colleagues politely ask if it wouldn’t be better to avoid alienating religious people. Shouldn’t we respect religious sensibilities, masking potential conflicts and building common ground with religious groups so as to create a better, more equitable world? ...

In science, of course, the very word “sacred” is profane. No ideas, religious or otherwise, get a free pass. The notion that some idea or concept is beyond question or attack is anathema to the entire scientific undertaking. This commitment to open questioning is deeply tied to the fact that science is an atheistic enterprise. “My practice as a scientist is atheistic,” the biologist J.B.S. Haldane wrote, in 1934. “That is to say, when I set up an experiment I assume that no god, angel, or devil is going to interfere with its course and this assumption has been justified by such success as I have achieved in my professional career.” It’s ironic, really, that so many people are fixated on the relationship between science and religion: basically, there isn’t one. In my more than thirty years as a practicing physicist, I have never heard the word “God” mentioned in a scientific meeting. Belief or nonbelief in God is irrelevant to our understanding of the workings of nature – just as it’s irrelevant to the question of whether or not citizens are obligated to follow the law.

Because science holds that no idea is sacred, it’s inevitable that it draws people away from religion. The more we learn about the workings of the universe, the more purposeless it seems. Scientists have an obligation not to lie about the natural world. Even so, to avoid offense, they sometimes misleadingly imply that today’s discoveries exist in easy harmony with pre-existing religious doctrines, or remain silent rather than pointing out contradictions between science and religious doctrine. It’s a strange inconsistency, since scientists often happily disagree with other kinds of beliefs. Astronomers have no problem ridiculing the claims of astrologists, even though a significant fraction of the public believes those claims.

Doctors have no problem condemning the actions of anti-vaccine activists who endanger children. And yet, for reasons of decorum, many scientists worry that ridiculing certain religious claims alienates the public from science.

When they do so, they are being condescending at best and hypocritical at worst.

## WHAT IS TRUTH, ANYWAY?

Michael Shermer

(Reprinted from his “Skeptic” column in *Scientific American*, April, 2017)

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s first definition, a “skeptic” is “one who holds that there are no adequate grounds for certainty as to the truth of any proposition whatever.” This is too nihilistic. There are many propositions for which we have adequate grounds for certainty as to their truth:

There are 84 pages in this issue of *Scientific American*. True by observation.

Dinosaurs went extinct around 65 million years ago. True by verification and replication of radiometric dating techniques for volcanic eruptions above and below dinosaur fossils.

The universe began with a big bang. True by a convergence of evidence from a wide range of phenomena, such as the cosmic microwave background, the abundance of light elements (such as hydrogen and helium), the distribution of galaxies, the large-scale structure of the cosmos, the redshift of most galaxies and the expansion of space.

These propositions are “true” in the sense that the evidence is so substantial that it would be unreasonable to withhold one’s provisional assent. It is not impossible that the dinosaurs died a few thousand years ago (with the universe itself having been created 10,000 years ago), as Young Earth creationists believe, but it is so unlikely we need not waste our time considering it.

Then there are negative truths, such as the null hypothesis in science, which asserts that particular associations do not exist unless proved otherwise. For example, it is telling that among the tens of thousands of government e-mails, documents and files leaked in recent years, there is not one indication of a UFO cover-up or faked moon landing or allegation that 9/11 was an inside job by the Bush administration. Here the absence of evidence is evidence of absence.

Other propositions are true by internal validation only: dark chocolate is better than milk chocolate; Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” is the greatest rock song; the meaning of life hinges on the number 42. These types of truth are purely personal and thus unverifiable by others. In science, we need external validation.

What about religious truths? The proposition that Jesus was crucified may be true by historical validation, inasmuch as a man whom we refer to as Jesus of Nazareth probably existed, the Romans routinely crucified people for even petty crimes, and most biblical scholars—even those who are atheists or agnostics, such as renowned religious studies professor Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—assent to this fact. The proposition that Jesus died for our sins, in contrast, is a faithbased claim with no purchase on valid knowledge. In between these is Jesus’s Resurrection, which is not impossible but would be a miracle if it were true. Is it?

The principle of proportionality demands extraordinary evidence for extraordinary claims. Of the approximately 100 billion people who have lived before us, all have died and none have returned, so the claim that one (or more) of them rose from the dead is about as extraordinary as one will ever find. Is the evidence commensurate with the conviction?

According to philosopher Larry Shapiro of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in his 2016 book, *The Miracle Myth*, "Evidence for the resurrection is nowhere near as complete or convincing as the evidence on which historians rely to justify belief in other historical events such as the destruction of Pompeii." Because miracles are far less probable than ordinary historical occurrences, such as volcanic eruptions, "the evidence necessary to justify beliefs about them must be many times better than that which would justify our beliefs in run-of-the-mill historical events. *But it isn't.*"

What about the eyewitnesses? Maybe they "were superstitious or credulous" and saw what they wanted to see, Shapiro suggests. "Maybe they reported only feeling Jesus 'in spirit', and over the decades their testimony was altered to suggest that they saw Jesus in the flesh. Maybe accounts of the resurrection never appeared in the original gospels and were added in later centuries. Any of these explanations for the gospel descriptions of Jesus's resurrection are far more likely than the possibility that Jesus actually returned to life after being dead for three days. The principle of proportionality also means we should prefer the more probable explanation over less probable ones, which these alternatives surely are.

Perhaps this is why Jesus was silent when Pontius Pilate asked him (John 18:38), "What is truth?"

A writer who says that there are no truths, or that all truth is "merely relative", is asking you not to believe him. So don't. Deconstruction deconstructs itself, and disappears up its own behind, leaving only a disembodied smile and a faint smell of sulphur. — *Roger Scruton*

### JESUS HAS TO FACE (AND EXPLAIN) YET ANOTHER EASTER

(<http://www.jesusandmo.net/comic/egg/>)

[The boys are at their favorite bar.]

**Mohammed:** So, Barmaid, got any plans for Jesus' Cruciver-sary celebrations?

**Barmaid:** No, just lots of chocolate.

**Jesus:** I'm getting fed up with people like you. Making light of Easter with your disrespectful neologisms and irrelevant confectionary.

I died for your sins! I was my own only begotten son! I sacrificed myself to myself in order to ... to satisfy my sense of justice so that ... as long as people believed, they'd ... oh, fuck it ... [puts his head down on the bar] ... I can't do this anymore. I'm so tired of trying to explain this nonsense.

**Barmaid:** Do you want some of my chocolate egg?

**Jesus:** Yes, please.

### 2017'S SECOND DUMBTH CANDIDATE

Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson, who has offered too many idiocies to count (the Egyptian pyramids were built – by Joseph, of course – to store grain), came up with another beaut in March in his first address to HUD employees.



Enslaved African people, he said, illustrated that America is "a land of dreams and opportunity".

*"There were other immigrants who came here in the bottom of slave ships, worked even longer, even harder for less. But they too had a dream that one day their sons, daughters, grandsons, granddaughters, great-grandsons, great-granddaughters, might pursue prosperity and happiness in this land."*

### AND THE THIRD



Here's CNN's very own Trump Hyscophant, Jeffrey Lord. He appeared (via Skype) on Alisyn Camerota's "New Day" show April 13, and bumbled and burbled his way through Camerota's persistent questions about what would happen to the people who would lose healthcare coverage if, in fact, the Affordable Care Act was repealed.

Lord kept trying to re-frame the issue as one of "freedom" (presumably freedom from doctors, hospitals and medicine), then dropped this bomb:

*"Think of President Trump as the Martin Luther King of health care."*

### AND A FOURTH! WHAT A MONTH FOR DUMBTH!

Meet Scott Wagner. He's a Pennsylvania State Senator (R, York) who is a chowderhead about middle-school level Earth Science and Astronomy.



Scott's enlightened enough to recognize that our climate is heating up, but in March proposed two of his very own theories (neither of which has anything to do with carbon emission) on why:

*"I haven't been in a science class in a long time, but the earth moves closer to the sun every year – you know the rotation of the earth. We're moving closer to the sun."*

And:

*"We have more people ... you know, humans have warm bodies. So, is heat coming off?"*

Oh, and he's a Republican candidate for Governor.

**'T**is the time's plague when madmen lead the blind.

– King Lear

# SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JUNE

**SHSNY BOOK CLUB**  
**THURS, MAY 4, 7-8:30 pm**  
**THE COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
**OF NEW YORK**

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)

We'll discuss

**THREE ESSAYS**  
**FROM "THE STONE",**  
**THE NYTIMES'S ONLINE**  
**PHILOSOPHY FORUM**

The *Times* describes "The Stone", which is moderated by Simon Critchley, who teaches philosophy at The New School for Social Research, as "A forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless."

For our reading, we have chosen these three interrelated and fascinating discussions:

- *Who Is 'Evil', and Who is the Victim?*

**Brad Evans and Simona Forti**  
 The Stone, Sep 16, 2016

- *Is Humanism Really Humane?*  
**Natasha Lennard and Cary Wolfe**  
 The Stone, Jan 9, 2017

- *The Intellectual Life of Violence*  
**Brad Evans and**  
**Richard J. Bernstein**  
 The Stone, Jan 26, 2017

To read any essay, go to [www.nytimes.com/column/the-stone](http://www.nytimes.com/column/the-stone) and simply type its title into the "Search" box.

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**STUDYING HUMANISM**  
**MON, JUNE 5, 6:30-8:30 pm**  
 Community Church of New York  
**THE FIRST HUMANIST:**  
**EPICURUS - Part 2**



Following up on our readings in April, our May discussion (moved to June 5 because of the holiday weekend) will focus on two pillars of Epicurean thought. We'll do just

half an hour's online reading.

**Online Required Reading:**

1. Google "Epicurus".
2. Click on "Epicurus | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy".
3. Scroll to the Table of Contents and click on and read the sections "3. Metaphysics" and "5. Ethics".

**MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI**  
**BOOK LAUNCH PARTY**  
**TUES, MAY 9, 6-9 pm**  
**Paulaner Brewhouse & Rest**  
**265 Bowery**

**HOW TO BE A STOIC:**  
**Using Ancient Philosophy**  
**to Live a Modern Life**

In his latest book, philosopher (and SHSNY Honorary Member) Prof. Pigliucci offers the pragmatic philosophy of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius that teaches us to act depending on what is within our control and separate things worth getting upset about from those that are not.

Join dozens of freethinkers for a lively evening of fellowship and philosophy at "NYC's best brewery and German restaurant".

**SHSNY BOOK CLUB**  
**JUNE 1 & JULY 6**  
 Book selections to be announced

**SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT**  
**MONDAY, MAY 8, 6:30 pm**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)**

**DENIAL**

Acclaimed writer and historian Deborah E. Lipstadt must battle for historical truth to prove the Holocaust actually occurred when David Irving, a renowned denier, sues her for libel — issuing a complaint under British law requiring the American academic to prove that the greatest atrocity of World War II actually took place. The 2016 film stars Rachel Weisz, Tom Wilkinson, and Timothy Spall.



**After-Film Discussion:**

*What can we do about "alternate facts"?*

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

**BRUNCH & CONVERSATION**  
**SUN, MAY 21, 11:30 am**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**



We gather in the saloon's back room, where the pub-grub menu includes a \$13 breakfast special,

the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles. Come join 20 or more freethinkers for food, fun and great, convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

**After-Brunch Discussion:**  
*What Would Humanist Healthcare Look Like?*



# SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JUNE

## GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, MAY 24, 7 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

**A SCIENCE SYMPOSIUM:**

**BILL NYE & JAMES RANDI**

Bill Nye wows the audience with wit, humor and inspiration about the future of science, technology, and education, how he got



his start as "the Science Guy" and what we can all do to "change the world" so

that everyone can embrace the wonders of science and reason.

James "The Amazing" Randi regales with stories from his forthcoming book. *A Magician in the Laboratory*, while explaining how to test paranormal claims, including the claims of the many challengers who have tried to win his foundation's million-dollar challenge. He inspired a new generation of young skeptics in the audience to go out and make a difference.

**Great Lectures on DVD is FREE**

*(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)*

## PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule (barring holidays and weather calamities) is ...

**Book Club: First Thursday**

at the Community Church of NY

**Movie Night: Second Monday**

at Stone Creek Lounge.

**Brunch: Third Sunday**

at Stone Creek Lounge

**Great Lectures on DVD:**

**4th Wednesday**

at Stone Creek Lounge.

**Studying Humanism: Last Monday**

at the Community Church of NY

**More info:** [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org)

and/or 646-922-7389

*Book now to guarantee your place!*

**SUNDAY, MAY 7, NOON**

**SHSNY's 10th Annual DAY OF REASON BRUNCH**

**at PETE'S TAVERN, 129 East 18 Street**

Our speaker will be:

**MICHAEL DE DORA**

**"From D.C. to Geneva: Secular Humanist Advocacy  
Around the World"**

Over the past decade, there has been significant growth in both the scope and impact of political advocacy by secularist, humanist, and atheist organizations in the United States. There has also been a rise in the number of freethought groups working on the international arena. What kind of work are these organizations engaged in? What are their major accomplishments? And what are their major challenges?



As director of both domestic and international advocacy for the Center for Inquiry, Michael De Dora has been directly involved in efforts to advance secular government and humanist values at all levels of public policy, from Washington, D.C. to the UN Headquarters in New York to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland. He will provide insight into the efforts of atheist, secularist, and humanist organizations to defend the open society.

## BRUNCH IS JUST \$25 ...

... for your choice of 11 entrees, tax, tips and a drink included. Join up to 50 of your fellow and sororal freethinkers for one of SHSNY's best annual get-togethers. Meet old friends, make new ones, schmooze, network and discuss ideas (what we do best).

## BUT DON'T WAIT!

Our upstairs private room at Pete's only seats 50. So guarantee your place by booking now, at [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org), using your credit card or PayPal.

## SHSNY ELECTION NOTICE

We are in the process of our triannual election to the SHSNY Board of Directors. Twelve current Board members and two new candidates are standing for (re) election. In the previous two issues of PIQUE we have run the statements of ten of them; below are the last four.

Ballots are being mailed to all dues-paid members of SHSNY contemporaneously with this newsletter. They are due at the P.O. Box by May 15. The current Board will meet to count them and certify the election during the week after, and the results will be announced in June PIQUE.

### JOHN A. WAGNER

I want to continue my six-year commitment to the SHSNY's Executive Board so that I can continue to expand and strengthen our community.

- I represent the SHSNY at the UN, where I work on the Committee for Freedom of Religion and Belief (CoFoRB) and the Committee for Children's Rights (CRC).

- I have promoted the development of social media and helped strengthen our SHSNY video presence. I believe we should redouble our efforts to use social media to attract new members and to educate the public about humanism.

- I started and administer our Facebook page, which has grown to over 1100 members.

- I strive to increase the involvement of members of the SHSNY in secular politics and instigated "The Humanist Activist", a new feature in PIQUE devoted to political issues.

- I am co-chair of the Secular Coalition for New York, a lobbying organization that has been endorsed both by the SHSNY and the American Humanist Association.

- I have helped organize many of the events and educational activities sponsored by SHSNY.

- I have worked to provide more activities and services that will strongly appeal to families with children, people who are in school, those just entering the work force, and those with active careers.

- I believe we should strive for a higher public profile and take credit for ongoing activities and services produced by SHSNY.

I am a Professor of Neurology & Neuroscience at Weill-Cornell Medical College in NYC and a founder of a biotech start-up called Sveikatal, Inc. I have been a freethinker and humanist since I was a teenager. I grew up in Iowa, received a Ph.D. from Princeton, continued my studies at the U. of California, San Francisco, and was on the faculty at Harvard Medical School.

I am a member of SHSNY, the American Humanist Association, NYC-Atheists, American Atheists, Gotham Atheists, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Iowa Atheists & Freethinkers, and Center for Inquiry-NY. I am also active in progressive Democratic politics.

I ask for your vote.



### BOB MURTHA

I write to announce my candidacy for a seat on the SHSNY Board. I hope to help in our resistance to Trump's plans to drive a wrecking ball through the wall that Thomas Jefferson erected many years ago between church and state.

I do not seek reelection as Vice President because I believe that Claire Miller is the ideal candidate for that position.



### CLAIRE MILLER

Two people whom I love very much and whose judgment I'd ordinarily trust have suggested that I run for the office of Vice President of this organization. My first reaction was that I'd need more time to absorb the ethos of the joint before I came in and wrecked it. But after some contemplation, I realized that I really do love every member of this organization, and it would be a pity to pass up the opportunity to put my hard work toward a purpose I feel so strongly, and which reaps such immediate personal benefits. So, for lack of a better term, let me be your pack animal. Or that's the term I'm using for this family newsletter.



### JOHN RAFFERTY



I am proud of my accomplishments as a member of the Board of SHSNY and Editor of PIQUE since 2002, and as President since 2007. In light of my record, I ask for your vote.

From a late-1990s sleepy coterie of old men with dwindling membership and only occasional organized events (Paul Kurtz in the 1990s once referred to us as "moribund"), SHSNY has become the leadership organization in New York's freethought community.

Since 2002, we have more than doubled dues-paying memberships (including tripling Family Memberships) and quadrupled the number of paid subscriptions to PIQUE, which is read in at least 30 states, the UK, Ireland, Norway, Germany, Lichtenstein, India, and Thor-only-knows how many other places to which it gets forwarded electronically.

We have developed a program of regular social and educational meetings for every week of the month, and produced special events featuring such luminaries as ACLU Past President Norman Dorsen, Columbia University John Dewey Professor of Philosophy Philip Kitcher, AHA Executive Director Roy Speckhardt, CSH Executive Director Tom Flynn, and our own Susan Jacoby, Richard Milner, Massimo Pigliucci, and Jennifer Michael Hecht.

What's more, we're solvent, without ever having to hold a fundraiser.



It's all been satisfying and (sometimes) great fun, and I look forward to even better times if reelected by you to the Board and by the Board to the presidency.

But a cardiac wake-up call last December signaled that it really is time for a change. And every one of the nominees in this Board election knows it, too. We have already begun a restructuring, doling out responsibility for tasks (scheduling events, developing new events, maintaining and building membership) that I have routinely handled. The current Board members have faced the realities ("*The sonofabitch really isn't going to do this forever, is he?*") and started shouldering the jobs, taking over the leadership.

All of which is good for the organization. And good for me, too, in terms of both my personal health (*stress!*) and my SHSNY legacy. I want this organization that I love to continue and to grow without me, so I have to let go.

Except for PIQUE. I want to write this until I drop.

*(Ed: This was received from Prof. Adams shortly after the March 22 terrorist attack that killed five and injured 50 more. - JR)*

### **A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE**

**John Adams**

#### **North Yorkshire (UK) Humanists**

"Earth has not anything to show more fair" is the celebrated first line of William Wordsworth's poem *On the View from Westminster Bridge* ... but not on Wednesday.

Wednesday was London's turn (yet again) on the battlefield that is deployed by faith-based terrorism. On the very day that the Brussels bombings of a year ago were being remembered, one Khalid Masood, a Muslim convert, decided that his most obvious route to paradise was to drive a car along the pavement of the bridge, killing and injuring as many pedestrians as he could, and then run up to the gates of the Houses of Parliament and stab a policeman.

London thus joins (yet again) the dismal litany of Western capitals attacked by Muslims: Paris, Madrid, Brussels, Berlin and, of course, New York.

The "popular" press having expressed (of course) outrage, treat these incidents as something alien. Bearded crackpots who dress strangely, have "radical" views and somehow decide to go on a murderous rampage.

Mr. Masood was English. He was born Adrian Russell Elms in Kent, not far from where I used to live when I worked at the local university. He seems to have had a life of petty crime and violence until, during a spell in prison, he converted to Islam. He was then able to lead a more austere life, eschewing minor crime for mass murder. To date five people are dead including the perpetrator, and some fifty injured, some of whom might not survive.

The Islamic establishment has been quick into the lists (they must be well prepared by now) telling us that Mr. Masood was not a "real" Muslim and was just using Islam for his nefarious purposes, that Islam is a religion of peace, and on and on.

At one level I feel deep sympathy for these people - it must be terrible to be a Muslim in a western country each

time something like this takes place and of course millions of followers of that religion have nothing but contempt for someone like Masood. Although fewer, apparently, felt the same way about the Charlie Hebdo attacks, since they were in part "provoked" by "anti-Muslim" content in the magazine. What can we make of all this?

The persistent response is that these people are psychopaths (that is to say they are ill, and bear little responsibility for their actions), they are "nutters" in the local vernacular. Or, contrarily, they are part of a world conspiracy to "undermine our values and our way of life", as our Prime Minister put it.

But why should any psychopath choose the vehicle of Islam to carry out his/her deranged actions? Mr. Masood hired the car he used as a murder weapon in Birmingham and then drove some 250 miles to Brighton on the south coast to stay in an hotel. The next day he set off north for Westminster. This was very far from an unpremeditated act.

Moreover the "not a real Muslim" mantra has three problems to overcome:

1. The implication that the speaker, the person who is making the judgment, is indeed a "real" Muslim and is positioned to make that judgment. Notwithstanding that the terrorist prays several times a day, wears a beard, gives alms regularly, attends the mosque frequently and can recite large chunks of the Koran, he is: "not a real Muslim". Upon what basis is this judgment being made? Other than the circular one that he does things of which the speaker does not approve.

2. These remarks are never made in the context of "good" works. I've never heard it said that Mother Teresa was "not a real Christian" and "just using Christianity" to do good things ... it is always a transparent attempt to absolve the religion of blame.

3. If it is true that Islam is "just being used", why does it work? Why in other words is this particular creed selected for this kind of murderous emulation. To put it another way, where are the Quaker suicide bombers? Where are the Jain terrorists? Self-evidently some religions are more violent than others and the failure of religious leaders to admit the fact and instead wrap themselves up in a blanket of euphemisms is yet another dreary part of this horrific narrative. They are permitted to do this by a complicit press that almost never raises the issues of the violence espoused by sacred texts. How can a religion that prescribes death for apostasy (or, as we might reasonably call it, changing your mind) be allowed to present itself as "peaceful"? The answer is the same as that to the failure of national newspapers to print copies of the Mohammad cartoons. Violence works ... just ask any gangster. The "free" press will happily destroy the reputation of some individual but it is cowed by the threat implicit in this kind of reaction.

In short, it has been a dismal few days in the UK.

As it happens, I am in London next week. I'm going to a meeting in the House of Commons and will be walking across Westminster Bridge ... wish me luck.

## KILLER CHRISTIANS? CAN'T IMAGINE WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT

John Rafferty

**D**id you know that Cedric Anderson, the “San Bernardino Shooter” — who walked into a classroom of special-needs children a couple of weeks ago with a .357 handgun, shot and killed his estranged wife and wounded two unrelated children, one of whom also died, then killed himself — was a Christian pastor? And a well-known one locally, at that, with frequent appearances on radio?

Neither did I.

Maybe this is a *mea culpa* moment. Maybe I didn't pay close enough attention to the news reports because, well, hell, because it was only three dead among the tens of thousands who will die by gunshot in America this year.

Or maybe this instance of hypocrisy is the media's. I don't remember a single headline or TV news lead that began, “Christian Pastor Kills Three in California”. But I can easily imagine what they might have been if Anderson had been an imam, or even just an everyday Muslim.

Or an atheist.

Oh, wait, I don't have to imagine that.

In 2015, when Craig Stephen Hicks killed three University of North Carolina students—all Muslims—in a rage over a parking-space argument, almost every news story used the word “atheist” in its headline or lead.

Just saying.

## ONE WEEK IN RIGHT-WING HYPOCRISY

(Based on Harper's Weekly Review, 4/12/2017)

**P**ossibly motivated by his daughter Ivanka's distress after watching TV coverage of a chemical-weapons attack by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that killed 86 civilians, *Donald Trump* — who in 2013 denounced Barack Obama's request for Congressional authorization under the Constitution to respond to an Assad chemical-weapons attack that killed *fourteen hundred* Syrian civilians — launched 59 Tomahawk missiles onto an airfield in the Syrian village of al-Shayrat without Constitutionally mandated Congressional approval.

House Speaker *Paul Ryan*, who in 2013 voted against that Obama authorization request, and described such action then as a “feckless show of force”, now said of the Trump strike, “These tactical strikes make clear that the Assad regime can no longer count on American inaction.”

Senate Majority Leader *Mitch McConnell*, who led at least 79 filibusters against Obama judicial nominees, changed longstanding Senate rules to block Democrats from filibustering the nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Fox News pundit *Bill O'Reilly* hired former president Bill Clinton's lawyer to advise him on workplace sexual-harassment allegations.

Trump defended O'Reilly, and proclaimed April to be National Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month.

## AND WAY BEYOND HYPOCRISY

John Rafferty

**R**emember Ken Adkins? Let me jog your memory. He's the anti-LGBT “Christian pastor” with four money-in-the-collection-plate congregations around the state of Georgia who, in response to last year's horrific massacre of 49 young people at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando wrote in a tweet:

*“Been through so much with these Jacksonville Homosexuals that I don't see none of them as victims. I see them as getting what they deserved.”*

Now you remember him?

On April 11 a jury found him guilty of eight charges of child molestation and aggravated child molestation. He faces life imprisonment.

Where, I'm sure, he'll start another “ministry”.

## A NEW (AND MORE HONEST) DEFINITION OF CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISM

John Rafferty

**I**n the aftermath of the almost-impeachment and real resignation of Alabama Governor Robert Bentley — a SuperChristian who said that God had “elevated” him to the State Capitol, and who used state funds to try to cover up his adulterous affair with a top aide and former beauty pageant winner — Christians across the state, *The New York Times* of April 11 reports, feel his disgrace as a “bitter blow”.

To answer the Why-did-he-do-it? question, Rev. John Killian, a former president of the Alabama Baptist State Convention, offered one answer straight out of the 17th century: “I believe it was the devil, and I believe the devil knew he was bagging big game.”

But it was Wayne Flynt, an ordained Baptist minister and one of Alabama's pre-eminent historians, who explained exactly how evangelicals in the 21st century could volubly support the obviously-guilty Bentley (his wife had divorced him) right up to the moment he resigned.

*“The idea that moral hypocrisy hurts you among evangelical voters is not true, if you're sound on all of the fundamentals. Being sound on the fundamentals depends on what the evangelical community has decided the fundamentals have become. At this time, what is fundamental is hating liberals, hating Obama, hating abortion and hating same-sex marriage.”*

Yep, that's pretty much what we thought: hate, hate, hate, and more hate.

**W**e have abundant reason to rejoice, that, in this land, the light of truth and reason has triumphed over the power of bigotry and superstition, and that every person may here worship God according to the dictates of his own heart. In this enlightened age, and in this land of equal liberty, it is our boast, that a man's religious tenets will not forfeit the protection of the laws, nor deprive him of the right of attaining and holding the highest offices that are known in the United States. — *George Washington*

## PARANOID FOR JESUS

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Conservatives Worry Flesh-Eating Robots Will Consume Christians" at Progressive Secular Humanist on patheos.com, 3/24/2017)

Right Wing Watch reports that Rick Wiles, host of the popular Christian radio program "End Times", is warning fellow Christians that flesh-eating robots will consume those who "do not conform to the requirements of this new society".

Wiles and a guest on the show "spent nearly two hours discussing the existence of giants, the prevalence of cannibalism and the looming Tribulation".

Wiles cited a 2009 *Wired* magazine article which reported that a company was working on developing robots that could refuel themselves by ingesting biomass from the environment. Despite the fact that the company itself stated that the robots would rely on plant matter, Wiles remains convinced that they will in fact fuel themselves by feasting on human flesh.

On the program Wiles warned:

*"Our military is developing an army of human flesh-eating robots. If you do not conform to the requirements of this new society, they're going to send a robot to your house to eat you for lunch. That may sound extremely radical, but that's where they're taking it. They will reduce the human population. You will conform!"*

At one point in the program Wiles declared: "The hatred of Christians will become so great in the Last Days that people will be encouraged to kill and eat them."

Wiles is no stranger to crazy Christian conspiracy theories from the lunatic fringe. Last year Wiles argued that Justice Antonin Scalia was murdered by Barack Obama as a human sacrifice to mark the pagan festival of Lupercalia.

Also last year, Wiles went on his radio program to lament the Obama administration's directive telling every public school district in the country to allow transgender students to use the bathrooms\* that match their gender identity. Wiles even went so far as to claim that Obama's humane decision concerning transgender students would lead to civil war, making the outrageous claim that President Obama (and Satan) intend to "rape your children".

Referring to the Obama administration as "the command center of the Obama homosexual revolution", Wiles predicted that most parents and school officials would "cave" and "sacrifice their children at the altar of sexual perversion", while those good Christians who protested would be "beaten in the streets with batons" and "hosed down with fire hoses".

No word on when the army will be rolling out those Christian-eating robots.

**Comment:** *You can't make this stuff up. I've gone on the TruNews website, and have seen what tens - if not hundreds - of thousands of "Christian" paranoids, racists, survivalists and, I assume, some innocents listen to every day that is all just as crazy as the above. And then they vote. - JR*

\* See Comment, page 2.

## BLONDE-HAIRED MOTH WITH SMALL GENITALS NAMED AFTER DONALD TRUMP

Tom Hale

(Excerpted from <http://www.iflscience.com/>, 1/18/2017)

"The Donald" has received the honor of having a new species of moth officially named after him: *Neopalpa donaldtrumpi*. Totally unrelated to the moths' namesake, the new species has a strange blonde thing on its head and small genitals.

The golden-haired species has been described this week in the online journal *ZooKeys*. With a wingspan of just 7-12 millimeters, these moths can be found around the future location of the Great-Wall-Of-Trump, Arizona, California, and Mexico's Baja California.

Evolutionary biologist Dr. Vazrick Nazari discovered the new species and named it in honor of the soon-to-be president. After sifting through a collection of moths from the genus *Neopalpa*, he noticed that a few specimens didn't match the criteria for previously known species. For one, the study notes it has "genitalia comparatively smaller" than its closest relative *N. neonata*. Using DNA barcoding analysis and catalogs from natural history institutions, Nazari showed that it was indeed a separate species.

Trump isn't the only US president to have a species named after him. To name but a few, George W. Bush has a slime beetle, Ronald Reagan has a wasp, and Bill Clinton has a fish. Obama holds the record for the most, with nine species named after him.

Dr. Nazari said he named the moth as such because of its uncanny resemblance to Trump's iconic hairdo. However, he also hopes the name will promote conservation efforts for North America's neglected micro-fauna.

## AND SPEAKING OF TRUMP, HERE ARE MORE "EASY ACTIVISM" IDEAS

After the 2016 election, fundraising strategist Jonathan Zucker came to the realization that one of the problems was that Democrats aren't even trying to be competitive in many districts around the country. So he came up with the idea of *It Starts Today*: a fundraising platform where small dollar donors pledge \$4.68 (or more) a month to create a pot of money for every Democrat running for Congress in 2018.

Why \$4.68? Well, there are 468 congressional races that year, which means each donor will be giving one penny a month to the candidate who gets the Democratic nomination in each race. Spread out over enough people, that can turn into real money to help politicians get started.

To join, go to <https://contribute.itstarts.today/2018>

If you live in NYC it's likely your congressional rep is progressive and will vote against the Trump agenda. But there are local swing election districts that sent supporters of Trump to congress with slim margins. Small donations can make a big difference in getting out the vote for progressives in 2018.

If you want to know how to help check [swingleft.org](http://swingleft.org).

## READERS RESPOND TO APRIL PIQUE

*To the Editor:* Re: the “spiritual side to one’s humanism” (Giles Kelly letter, April PIQUE), I’ve never been clear as to the meaning of “spiritual”. The dictionary isn’t much help, offering a half-dozen meanings that boil down to non-material, non-physical, non-exact, essentially non-existent and unreal. In the minds of believers it can be produced by contemplation of their religion or their particular dogmatic agenda, be that political, social, or personal. Some say that watching a sunset, or a beautiful scene, or an episode of pleasant tranquility, is spiritual. Or that observation or emotions in the absence of understanding is spiritual.

But I’ve been too long immersed in science and reality to buy into these explanations. I deny religion and deny labeling as spiritual any particular scene, or atmosphere, or “feeling”. Either I understand what is going on or, if I don’t, I’m content to shrug my shoulders and say that I don’t understand, and won’t excuse my ignorance by labeling it “spiritual”.

But there is a class of spirituals I do admire: those lovely songs from the South once labeled as “Negro” spirituals. – *Chic Schissel*

*To the Editor:* Just a few comments on the fine April PIQUE. Peter Watson (“Convergence: The Most Important Idea

about the Universe”) lost any shred of credibility with his claim that photosynthesis and avian navigation are explicable by quantum physics. Ditto for his notion that there is such a thing as “quantum biology”. Good grief. That’s the type of rubbish I expect to hear on PBS when they feature Deepak Chopra.

Your claim that “We all love Shaq” (“We Have Our First Dumbth Nominee of 2017. Good Grief. Guess Who?”) is factually incorrect. I certainly do not, nor do I love any professional athletes. What’s to love about a bunch of overpaid, over privileged, overrated and oversexed jocks whose boorish behavior on and off the playing field or court would have been unthinkable back in the 1960s (e.g., chest thumping, finger wagging, swinging from the basket, baseball players who look like cavemen, line dancing in the end zone or turning back flips after a touchdown, and yelling “Who’s your daddy?” to a tackled opponent).

I used to be an avid sports fan. No more. BTW, is there any need for us to submit other candidates for the next Dumbth Award? It seems that Shaq should have it all wrapped up.

Finally, I wish the words “spiritual” and “spirituality” would be banned from the English language, or at least from all freethought organizations and groups.

– *Dennis Middlebrooks*

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