

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

**'We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special.'**

**Stephen Hawking  
1942-2018**



April, 2018

## WHAT SHOULD WE THINK/SAY/DO ABOUT LAWRENCE KRAUSS AND MICHAEL SHERMER?

John Rafferty

I don't want to write this. I don't want to even consider the allegations of sexual misconduct against physicist Lawrence Krauss and Skeptic publisher Michael Shermer, two of the leading lights of the freethought movement in America.

I've attended lectures by both men, own two of



Krauss's books, and chatted amicably with him briefly at NECSS a couple of years ago. I subscribe to *Skeptic* and make Shermer's "Skeptic" column my first read in *Scientific American* every



month. More to the point here, I have reprinted or excerpted their ideas and arguments in these pages well over a dozen times. Simply put, I have long admired both men. And I don't want to even hear about the accusations.

Which makes me part of the problem.

And the problem is that more and more women are coming forward with credible stories of harassment, groping (sometimes drunken) and worse at freethought conferences, and of a widespread and pervasive gender bias that's not "frat boy", but rather a "nerd-ish" assumption of male superiority similar to that in the high-tech and "Silicon Valley" communities, the "no-girls-allowed" AV Clubs of high school not quite all grown up.

Shermer denies all the charges absolutely, and ignores the issue in his columns. Krauss, after being suspended by Arizona State University, where he is a professor, has offered a qualified apology for "... my language or demeanor [that] sometimes made others feel uncomfortable."

Are all the stories true? Probably not. As Mark

Oppenheimer wrote in "Will Misogyny Bring Down the Atheist Movement?" on [buzzfeed.com](http://buzzfeed.com), "I heard some rumors about Shermer that were wildly implausible, offered by women who seemed to be eager to jump aboard the anti-Shermer bandwagon. (One said that in a crowded auditorium Shermer harassed her 'with his eyes', by singling her out to look at in the audience.)"

But so what? For the far-and-away-most part, the stories ring true: you know it, I know it, any observer with wide-open eyes and ears knows it.

Freethought organizations in America – atheist, agnostic, skeptic, rationalist, bright, and humanist – are majority male and, in their leadership, overwhelmingly male and, all too often, sexist.

And this issue isn't going to go away with the departure or disgrace of Shermer or Krauss, or of the next drunken buffoon at NECSS.

What are we going to do about it? As Oppenheimer further wrote on [buzzfeed.com/markoppenheimer/will-misogyny-bring-down-the-atheist-movement](http://buzzfeed.com/markoppenheimer/will-misogyny-bring-down-the-atheist-movement), which I urge, truly urge, everyone reading this to read:

*"To those outside the community, freethought would seem an unlikely candidate for this sort of internal strife. Aren't atheists and agnostics supposed to be liberal, forward-thinking types?"*

Well, aren't we?

In the coming months, in these pages and in the various SHSNY gatherings, we're going to face the issue and face up to the four words every man dreads to hear from a woman: "We have to talk."

## YOU DIDN'T MISS MARCH PIQUE ...

... it missed you. Because of a family emergency and general frenzy, there was no March issue. Sorry, and we'll make it up with an extra issue this Summer. – JR

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS:** John Rafferty, *Pres./Editor*; Claire Miller, *V.P.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secty.*; Donna Marxer, *Treas.*; Kiwi Callahan, Matt Callahan, Jonathan Engel, Maria Graber, Dorothy Kahn, Carl Marxer, Carlos Mora, Bob Murtha, Sharif Rahman, John Wagner  
SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org) / 646-922-7389

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## HERE COMES GENERATION Z, THE MOST ATHEIST EVER IN THE U.S.

**Hemant Mehta, The Friendly Atheist**

(Excerpted – and lightly edited – from “Survey Finds That Generation Z is More Atheistic Than Any Other Age Group” on *patheos.com*, 1/25/18)

According to The Barna Group, a Christian polling organization, Generation Z (born from 1999-2015) is the least Christian generation ever seen.

The study indicates that 35 percent of Generation Z teens considered themselves to be atheist, agnostic or not affiliated with any religion. By comparison, only 30 percent of Millennials, 30 percent of Generation X and 26 percent of Baby Boomers said the same.

The study shows that almost twice as many teens in Generation Z (13 percent) claimed to be atheist than Millennials (7 percent).

This can only mean one thing.

And keep in mind we got to those numbers long before Donald Trump entered office and began exposing the rampant hypocrisy of white evangelical Christians, who were already losing numbers and respect. And Trump will inevitably make their problem even worse before he’s booted from the White House. They know this. They don’t care, though, considering how many Christian leaders continue standing by Trump no matter what horrible things he says and does.

Another reason Gen Z wants nothing to do with Christianity? 69 percent of them accept the notion of a transgender identity, while a third know somebody who’s trans. Just as we saw with gays and lesbians, it’s hard to demonize somebody you know, and what is evangelical Christianity these days if not the largest anti-LGBTQ club in the country?

If you want to hate people, the church doors are wide open. If you want to fight for civil rights, you won’t be able to do it from within the church walls.

## ... AND IN EUROPE EVEN MORE SO Harriet Sherwood

(Excerpted from “Christianity as default is gone: the rise of a non-Christian Europe”, *theguardian.com*, 3/20/2018)

Europe’s march towards a post-Christian society has been starkly illustrated by research showing a majority of young people in a dozen countries do not follow a religion.

The survey of 16- to 29-year-olds found the Czech Republic is the least religious country in Europe, with 91 percent of that age group saying they have no religious affiliation. Between 70 percent and 80 percent of young adults in Estonia, Sweden and the Netherlands also categorize themselves as non-religious.

The most religious country is Poland, where 17 percent of young adults define themselves as non-religious, followed by Lithuania with 25 percent.

In the UK, only 7 percent of young adults identify

as Anglican, fewer than the 10 percent who categorize themselves as Catholic. Young Muslims, at 6 percent, are on the brink of overtaking those who consider themselves part of the country’s established church.

The figures are published in a report, *Europe’s Young Adults and Religion*, by Stephen Bullivant, a professor of theology and the sociology of religion at St Mary’s University in London. They are based on data from the European social survey 2014-16.

Religion was “moribund”, he said. “With some notable exceptions, young adults increasingly are not identifying with or practising religion.” The trajectory was likely to become more marked.

“Christianity as a default, as a norm, is gone, and probably gone for good – or at least for the next 100 years.”

**On the other hand ...**

## SCIENTISTS PROVE ATHEISTS DON’T EXIST

**Andrew Hall**

(Excerpted from *Patheos.com* 4/6/2017)

A new study by the Theological Institute of Technology (T.I.T.) proves without a doubt that atheists are not real.

The school, dedicated to its mission of “Discovering God’s truth through the most advanced scientific methods and stuff”, published a 49-page peer reviewed article, “Atheists Willfully Deny God”, in *The Journal of Faith-Based Epistemology*.

“*The Journal* is one of the most prestigious publications of the scientific fundamentalist community,” stated Professor Andrew Canard, who co-authored the paper. “Everyone in church read it and prayed for guidance from the Almighty. God told us the paper was valid. That’s better than peer review. It’s godly review.”

A main point of the paper is that the calendar proves atheists don’t exist. After all, if Jesus hadn’t been born, then how could we possibly be in the year 2017? Scientists working on the report worked tirelessly to show how it is impossible to be an atheist and still use the method of recording days, weeks, and months. Just by using a calendar atheists testify to the existence of Jesus as the third person of the Trinity. However, they did feel that someone who is consciously in a state of rebellion against God could use the calendar and still say he or she is an atheist.

Scientists working on the paper discovered that people innately engage in *magical thinking*. The authors state that’s not a joke:

“Magical thinking is humanity’s proclivity to use non-scientific beliefs and expectations to explain the world. God made us psychologically to embrace superstition and faith. Atheists don’t really believe in science. They’re just faking it to impress their friends at Starbucks.”

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos is embracing the new findings and is vowing to spread the good news to every single child in America.

“We’re making sure that when the Rapture comes, no child is left behind,” she stated.

(Comment: April Fool – JR)

**Real News Flash:**

**MAN WHO BELIEVES A  
2,000-YEAR-OLD  
JEWISH CARPENTER-  
TURNED-ZOMBIE IS GOD  
WARNS US ALL TO BEWARE  
OF "FAKE NEWS"**



**And right on cue:**

Catholics Online, a large and popular Facebook page for Catholics, declares:

*"Before he died, Stiph [sic] Hawkins [sic] who did not believe in God requested to visit the Vatican. 'Now I believe' was the only statement he made after the Holy Father blessed him."*

That the Catholics running the Facebook page could not even spell Hawking's name correctly is a good indication of the intellectual abilities of those running the page.

**JESUS LECTURES THE BARMAID  
ON THE REAL MEANING OF EASTER**

*(Transcribed from [jesusandmo.com](http://jesusandmo.com))*

**Mohammed:** So, Barmaid, got any plans for Jesus' Cruciversary 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 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.

**A**nd next day the miracle occurred, crucifixion, resurrection, and he rose again from the dead and if he sees his shadow another 2000 years of guilt." – *Robin Williams*

**THE ATHEIST PIG ASKS WHERE GOD IS**

*(Transcribed from [TheAtheistPig.com](http://TheAtheistPig.com) on [patheos.com](http://patheos.com), 2/20/2018)*

**Christian Woman:** Well, another mass shooting. And do you know why? It's because liberals and atheists banned God from society.

**The Atheist Pig:** All right, let's do this. First, I thought God was everywhere, at all times, so make up your mind about that. Second, how many of those kids believed in God and begged him for help before being murdered? And your god refuses because he's not allowed in? What is he? A vampire who needs to be invited?

And what about that church shooting? Was God banned from that, too? And why is your god abiding by the so-called ban by atheists? What kind of sense does that make?

**Christian Woman:** One of these days you're going to meet God, you know.

**The Atheist Pig:** Not if I'm involved in a mass shooting or any other disaster, apparently. He tends to avoid those.

**"GLORY HALLELUJAH"**

**Frank Turner**

**W**ant an antidote to Passover and Easter? Go to YouTube and type in "Frank Turner, Glory Hallelujah, Wembley Stadium", and enjoy four minutes of ten thousand young people singing this atheist anthem along with Turner. – *JR*  
"Brothers and sisters, have you heard the news?"

The storm has lifted and there's nothing to lose,  
So swap your confirmation for your dancing shoes,  
Because there never was no God.

Step out of the darkness and onto the streets,  
Forget about the fast, let's have a carnival feast,  
Raise up your lowered head and hear the liberation beat,  
Because there never was no God.

There is no God,  
So clap your hands together,  
There is no God,  
No heaven and no hell.  
There is no God,  
We're all in this together,  
There is no God,  
So ring that victory bell.

No cowering in the dark before these overbearing priests,  
No waiting until we die until we retribute the meek,  
No blaming all our failings on imaginary beasts,  
Because there never was no God.

No fighting over land your distant fathers told you of,  
No spilling blood for those who never spread love,  
No finger pointing justified by phantoms up above,  
Because there never was no God.

There is no God,  
So clap your hands together,  
There is no God,  
No heaven and no hell.  
There is no God,  
We're all in this together,  
There is no God,  
So ring that victory bell.

I know you're scared of dying man and I am too,  
But pretending it's not happening won't see us through,  
If we accept an end game we haven't got much time,  
Then here and now we can try and do things right.  
We'd be our own Salvation Army and together we'd believe  
In all the wondrous things mere mortals can achieve.

I've known beauty in the stillness of cathedrals in the day,  
I've sung "Glory Hallelujah" won't wash my sins away?

But now I'm singing my refrain and this is what I say,  
I say there never was no God.

There is no God,  
So clap your hands together,  
There is no God,  
No heaven and no hell.  
There is no God,  
We're all in this together,  
There is no God,  
So ring that victory bell."

## RELIGION IMPARTS MERE BELIEF, NOT CERTAINTY

J.H. McKenna

(Reprinted from *patheos.com*, 2/1/18)

*The Opinionated Dictionary of Religion* includes the following:

*Belief*. noun. *An idea presumed to be true but not known to be true; also called Mere belief.*

If it had always been accepted that belief does not rise to the level of knowledge, religious intolerance might not have marred our histories. Religious intolerance arose with presumptions of certainty—the sureness that my sect possesses certified knowledge and therefore cannot endure your sect’s evident error.

But knowledge is an altogether different matter than belief. Compare the statement “I believe a goat has horns” with “I know a goat has horns.” They are not identical sentences. The former sentence hints at doubt and experiential distance from goats, while the latter suggests personal ocular or tactile experience of pointy projections atop sheep-related mammals. A Swiss mountaineer knows goats have horns, while a Manhattan financier only believes they do. (Or is it vice versa?)

We know very little and we believe much. Of all the ideas crowded into our heads in a lifetime, the majority of them are a matter of belief, not knowledge. Mere belief.

Consider an array of ideas that are mere beliefs for us:

Historical ideas, ideas about matters that predate our birth, are mere beliefs for us, not knowledge. We believe a man named Shakespeare wrote a play called “Hamlet” but we don’t know that. We believe Charlemagne was crowned in the year 800 but we don’t know that either. We believe Confucius was an ancient teacher of ethics but we don’t really know that. We may assent to all these and believe them, but we have no certain knowledge of them. They’re mere beliefs for us.

Also, ideas about matters beyond our expertise are mere beliefs for us, not knowledge. We believe many hieroglyphics refer to an afterlife but we don’t know that if we’re not experts called Egyptologists. We believe the distance to the sun in summertime is ninety-one million miles (or 155 thousand million football fields or a trillion pillowcases stacked end to end) but we don’t know that if we’re not astronomy experts. Again, we may assent to all these and believe them, but we have no certain knowledge of them. They’re mere beliefs for us.

Also, ideas beyond the confirmation of our drowsy grasp, our sniffing nose, our glimmering tongue, our bent-back ears, our oval eyes, are mere beliefs for us and not knowledge.

We believe a birch tree has soft bark but we don’t know that unless we handle the stuff. We believe a Jeffrey pine smells like butterscotch but we don’t know that unless we press our nose into its barked crevices and sniff. We believe Seville oranges are very sour but we don’t know that unless we lick their insides. We believe a piccolo trumpet creates high notes but we don’t know that until we hear the trumpet

competently played. We believe a Fennec fox has massive ears but we don’t know that until we lay our eyes upon that frisky mammal. Again, we may assent to all these and believe them without sensual confirmation, but we have no certain knowledge of them without sensual confirmation. They’re mere beliefs.

There are exceptions to knowing without the aid of our senses. We can attain certain knowledge of mathematical ideas, and we can attain certain knowledge about our current state of mind. I know  $4 \times 4$  is 16 and I know I am thinking of almonds right now. These are certain.

There are also exceptions to certainty via the senses since the senses can be fooled. What does a straight stick stuck in water look like? A desert mirage look like?

If you want to claim intuition as a sixth sense and as a way to certified knowledge, you must permit that argument to every claimant: “By intuition and in my heart of hearts I know there’s a God” is equal to “By intuition and in my heart of hearts I know there’s no God” and equal to “By intuition and in my heart of hearts I know there’s a pink tea cozy orbiting a pink tea pot orbiting the planet Mercury.”

There’s no other reply but to reject all claims that subjective intuition provides certain knowledge.

Knowledge of a thing never requires an act of faith, but belief in a thing always necessitates faith. We are willing to believe many ideas on faith when we don’t actually know those ideas are true. And this brings up religious belief.

Since almost all religious persons are far removed from the origins of their religion, religion for almost all people is a matter of mere belief, not knowledge. The founder of a religion may have seen an apparition of God (in which case she or he did not merely believe that God exists but knew it), but for all subsequent participants of that religion, God is a mere belief, not a datum of knowledge. Belief-ideas may always be doubted; otherwise they’d be knowledge-ideas.

Given the inherent doubt attending religious belief, it is remarkable that most religions insist that their followers claim certainty of belief, which is a contradiction in terms.

In some religions, a Believer (a telling designation) absolutely must pose as a Knower. “I know Jesus walked upon the surface of a deep pond,” someone might say. But, really, they don’t know that. It’s a matter of belief and not knowledge.

Since posing as Knowers was ever a cause of religious intolerance, the world of religion would be much more serene if people were to accept religious ideas as *mere* beliefs that, not being in the category of “knowledge”, can never impart certitude.

Faith cannot erase doubt, and indeed doubt is the condition for the possibility of faith. Certainty expels faith. When I know for certain a lemon is sour, I don’t need faith to believe a lemon is sour. Faith therefore corresponds to doubt: faith/doubt are the two sides of a coin.

Without the provocation of religious certainty, religions lose one of the principal motives for engaging in intolerance.

*Mere belief* offers religion what may be called the virtue of uncertainty.

## WE CELEBRATED DARWIN DAY WITH SUSAN JACOBY... AND WEST POINT SECULAR CADETS

Fifty-two of us gathered in the upstairs room of The Storehouse on West Twenty-Third on February 9 for SHSNY's 10th Annual Darwin Day Celebration, and an excellent time was had by all.

We met, mingled, ate and drank, greeted friends old and new, and happily welcomed nine distinguished guests: West Point cadets who are members of the United States Military Academy chapter of the national Secular Student Alliance. They'd found our website, contacted us about possibly attending SHSNY events, and we were delighted to invite them, as our guests (your membership dues at work), to our biggest deal of the year – Darwin Day.

They enjoyed the evening, we enjoyed their company, and hope to see them often again.

### SUSAN JACOBY MADE US THINK. NOT ABOUT TRUMP ... ABOUT OURSELVES

*Reported by John Rafferty*

Referencing a 1978 science fiction novel by Arthur Herzog titled *IQ 83*, our Darwin Day speaker, best-selling author, freethinker – and SHSNY Honorary Member – Susan Jacoby, likened America in the Age of Trump to a society whose members have all lost about 20 points of IQ.

In her talk, as in her just-published *The Age of American Unreason in a Culture of Lies*, a new edition of her 2008 best seller, Susan cautioned us that as vile as he may be, Trump is not the cause of America's "stupid sickness", but a symptom of it, and his presidency a result of it. The fault, *pace* Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.

Three factors, she said, are involved in our national dumbing-down. First is our shortened digital attention span, a decline in extended, thoughtful reading. Video games and 140-character social media feeds shorten our attention span and crowd out real reading and information gathering. In



2008 we laughed at a VP candidate who could not name a single newspaper or periodical she read; today we have become inured to a president who won't even read his daily briefings ("I like bullet points.").

A second factor is the degradation

#### *A Good Time Was Had by All ...*

Giddian Beer, Bill Carter, Bill Chapman, Karen Chamberlain, Vince Corrado, Barbara DeMarco, Richard Elrauch, Jonathan Engel, Karen Engel, Brian Engel, Will Engel, Beth Everett, Chris Everett, Joel Galker, Harry Graber, Maria Graber, Steven Green, Elenore Greene, Timothy Greene, Lorraine Gudas, Jay Gumbiner, Eliane Hahn, Max Hahn, Elaine Heller, Richard Heller, Susan Jacoby, Dorothy Kahn, Dennis Kendrick, Brian Lemaire, Laurence Mailender, Carl Marxer, Claire Miller, Carlos Mora, Bob Murtha, Charlotte Pomerantz, John Rafferty, Sharif Rahman, Caroline Rubinstein, Rai Sashe, Chic Schissel, John Wagner, Mike Weiss, Phil Winegar ... and nine Secular Student Cadets from the United States Military Academy.



of public discourse. "Elitist", "intellectual", "expert", and "liberal" are now curse words, and even scholar Obama routinely refers to Americans as "folks". Imagine, Susan said, our Constitution beginning, "We the folks ...". Even worse is the debasement of language in the public sphere. When Madonna answers critics of the Women's March with "Fuck You" on national television (and we all cheer), what is the only possible answer, other than "Fuck you, too!"?

The third and final factor, Susan argues, is a decline in civic literacy. Starting with changes in our educational curriculums in the 1970s, we have processed two, close to three generations of high school graduates who can't name the three branches of government or their U.S. senator. They don't understand citizenship, they don't vote, and in the post-truth "culture of lies", they don't care.

The prescription, the antidote to combat "stupid sickness"? Engagement. Activism. "Liberal intellectuals ought to be talking about taking over their local and state school boards," Susan urged, "not about running Oprah Winfrey for president."

"The poisonous political climate makes it more, not less, important that all who value reason and learning make every effort – more stringent efforts than any of us have made in the past – to see that 'post-truth' will one day be viewed as an anachronism."

*Applause. Applause.*



# SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL - JUNE 2018

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, APRIL 5, 7-8:30 pm  
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH  
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)  
We'll discuss

### COLLUSION:

**Secret Meetings, Dirty Money,  
and How Russia Helped  
Donald Trump Win**  
Luke Harding

Elaine Heller will lead the discussion of this explosive expose by the *Guardian* reporter and former Moscow bureau chief that lays out the Trump administration's ties to Moscow, and Russia's political game to upend American democracy.



Drawing on new material and his expert understanding of Moscow and its players, Harding takes the reader through every bizarre and disquieting detail of the most shocking election scandal in American history.

"Collusion is invaluable in collating the overwhelming evidence of a web of relationships between the Kremlin, Trump and members of Trump's circle." – Michelle Goldberg, *The New York Times*  
– Paperback and Kindle available.

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

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## TEXT US ON TWITTER

@SHS\_NewYork

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MAY 3, 7-8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York  
AT THE EXISTENTIALIST

CAFE: **Freedom, Being, and  
Apricot Cocktails**  
Sarah Bakewell

Named one of the Ten Best Books of 2016 by *The New York Times*, here's a spirited account of perhaps the major intellectual movement of the twentieth century and the revolutionary thinkers – Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Raymond Aron – who came to shape it, by the best-selling author of *How to Live*.

"Tremendous ... rigorous and clarifying ... Highly recommended for anyone who thinks." – *Library Journal*. "... both breezy and brainy." – *Washington Post*

– Paperback and Kindle available.

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JUNE 7, 7-8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York  
**THE MASTER ALGORITHM:**

**How the Quest for the  
Ultimate Learning Machine  
Will Remake Our World**  
Pedro Domingos

Domingos lifts the veil to give us a peek inside the learning machines that power Google, Amazon, and your smartphone. He assembles a blueprint for the future universal learner – the Master Algorithm – and discusses what it will mean

If data-ism is today's philosophy, this book is its bible.

## WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEAD A BOOK CLUB EVENING?

Let's talk, at [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org).

## LET'S HAVE A DISCUSSION!

MON, APRIL 9, 7 pm  
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge  
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves

**WILL MYSOGYNY KILL  
THE FREETHOUGHT  
MOVEMENT IN AMERICA?**

Why is the freethought movement – especially in the leadership – so overwhelmingly male? Where are all the women, and why are so many of them angry?

See Page 1 for the heads-up on the front-page problem that's bedeviling all our groups – atheist, agnostic, skeptic, rationalist, naturalist, bright, and humanist.

That's the topic of this month's *Let's Have a Discussion* evening, our new monthly social/food-and-drink/get-together.

Come, join in, discuss, argue, laugh, have fun, and vote on next month's topic. – JR

## BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, APRIL 15, 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 fellow freethinkers for food, fun and convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

**After-Brunch Discussion:**  
*Facebook, Cambridge Analytica:  
Whatever happened to privacy?*

# SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL - JUNE 2018

**GREAT LECTURES ON DVD  
WED, APRIL 25, 7 pm  
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge  
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves  
SIX EASY STEPS TO AVERT  
THE COLLAPSE OF  
CIVILIZATION**

**David Eagleman**

Civilizations always think they are immortal, but they almost always perish, leaving ruins. We can avoid that fate and we've got the internet to make it happen. David Eagleman, who can make his most serious presentations (like his multi-parter on the brain) entertaining, explains what the six easy steps we need to take are.



1) *Try not to cough on one another.* More humans have died from epidemics than from all famines and wars in history. Disease precipitated the fall of Greece, Rome and the civilizations of the Americas.

2) *Don't lose things.* As proven by the destruction of the Alexandrian library and the literature of the Mayans and Minoans, knowledge is hard won, but easily lost.

3) *Tell each other faster.* Don't let natural disasters cascade. The Minoans perished for the lack of a tsunami alert system, which we now have.

4) *Mitigate tyranny.* The USSR's collapse was made inevitable by state-mandated errors, such as the Afghanistan War.

5) *Get more brains involved in solving problems.* Educate, Educate, Educate.

6) *Try not to run out of energy.* When energy expenditure outweighs energy return, collapse ensues.

**Book now to guarantee your place!  
SUNDAY, MAY 6, NOON  
SHSNY's 11th Annual  
DAY OF REASON BRUNCH  
in the Speakeasy Room of  
Pete's Tavern,  
129 East 18 Street**

With a distinguished speaker  
to be announced

(watch your email inbox)  
**BRUNCH IS JUST \$28 ...**

... for your choice of 11 entrees, tax, tips, and a drink (Bloody Mary, Mimosa) included. Join up to 50 of your fellow freethinkers to meet old friends, make new ones, schooze, network, and discuss ideas.

**BUT DON'T WAIT!**

Our room only seats 50, so guarantee your place at [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org), using your credit card or PayPal.

**STUDYING HUMANISM  
IS GOING ON HIATUS**

Four-plus years of Studying Humanism, it seems, are enough. At least for the time being.

Ideas for a reimagining of the once-popular monthly series – perhaps (*only perhaps*) beginning in the fall of this year, will be welcomed at [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org).

– John Rafferty

**PLANNING AHEAD**

The usual SHSNY schedule is ...

**Book Club: First Thursday**  
at the Community Church of NY

**Let's Have a Discussion:**

**Second Monday**

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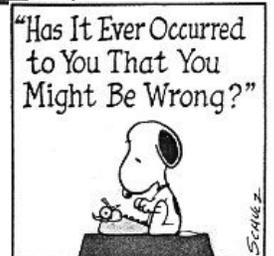
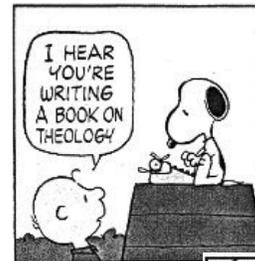
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# 10 TOUGH QUESTIONS FOR THE ATHEIST TO ANSWER

## Part 2

Bob Seidensticker

(Excerpted from *patheos.com*, 4/22/2017)

*(Editor: Our Part 1 repro of Mr. Seidensticker's rebuttal of Christian apologist Warner Wallace's essay, "The Christian Worldview is the Best Explanation", appeared in February PIQUE. It addressed the first three of Wallace's "tough questions", i.e.: How did the universe come into being?; Why does there appear to be design (fine tuning) in the universe?; and How did life originate? We continue with Part 2 herein. – JR)*

*The universe is simply one of those things  
that happens from time to time.*

*– physicist Edward P. Tryon*

### 4. Why Does There Appear to Be Evidence of Intelligence in Biology?

*Wallace: "Most scientists are quick to agree that biological systems often 'appear' to be designed. There are many examples of biological 'machines' that appear to be irreducibly complex, a sure sign of design. . . . Perhaps the most important evidence suggesting the involvement of an intelligent agent is the presence of DNA and the guiding role that this DNA plays in the formation of biological systems."*

Appearances can be deceiving. ELIZA was a computer program with which users could have a typed conversation, as if with an attentive friend. Originally written in 1966, it could be assigned as a homework problem today. It convincingly mimics intelligence, though it contains none. Perhaps we're seeing an ELIZA effect when we look at DNA, imagining intelligence where there is none.

Is the marvelous complexity we see in the cell a clue to an omniscient designer? Or is this clumsy, non-optimal Rube Goldberg machine actually evidence for evolution? Biologists are satisfied that evolution explains it. Laymen have no grounds by which to reject the scientific consensus as the best provisional explanation we have.

The claim of irreducible complexity doesn't convince biologists either.

As for DNA being strong evidence for intelligence, guess again. In fact, DNA alone demolishes this Argument from Design. DNA is a record of evolution's sloppy progress, not the perfect blueprint of an omniscient designer.

The Christian might point out that for every instance of information, we find an intelligence behind it. That may be so, but for every instance of intelligently caused information, that intelligence is natural, not supernatural.

Given the long list of things we thought were supernatural but are actually natural (disease, earthquakes, and so on), you'd think that apologists would be more cautious. But no, once science resolves a puzzle, they'll just retreat to another unanswered question to defend their God of the Gaps.

### 5. How Did Human Consciousness Come into Being?

*Wallace: "[As evolution proceeds, naturalists must]*

*imagine that spatially-arranged matter somehow organized itself to produce non-spatial, immaterial mental states. Naturalism has no reasonable explanation for how this might come to pass."*

Ah, but it does: emergent properties. Consider a water molecule. It doesn't have the properties of wetness, fluidity, or surface tension, but once you get trillions of trillions of them, then these properties emerge.

Or take the human brain. Our brains have roughly 100 billion neurons. A single neuron doesn't think 100 billion times as fast; it doesn't think at all. Thinking is another emergent phenomenon.

If the point is that we have plenty to learn about consciousness, that's certainly true. Again, science's long to-do list of unanswered questions does nothing to support the Christian claim.

Wallace also insists on the existence of the mind as something separate from the brain, but he gives no evidence of this dualism. For every instance that we know of, a mind is supported by a physical brain.

Remember the story of Phineas Gage, the man who had a steel rod shot through his head while working on a railroad tunnel? Or consider an Alzheimer's patient. As the physical brain is damaged or deteriorates, the mind is also damaged. The "mind" is simply what the brain does.

If Wallace thinks that the mind (or soul) is something separate or that consciousness is not the inevitable end result of a sufficiently large brain, he needs to show evidence.

### 6. Where Does Free Will Come From?

Wallace imagines various philosophical problems with free will and then solves them with God as the first mover. Of course, he doesn't explain the new puzzles that the God hypothesis introduces—where God came from or how God could always have existed or what laws of nature (if any) God breaks to do his miracles. This hypothesis teaches us nothing new. God becomes a synonym for "I don't know."

If God is the reason that we have free will, then Wallace is saying that a godless universe would have no free will. I await evidence of this claim.

I have little interest in philosophical puzzles. In the apologetics context, they seem like nothing more than smoke screens.

### 7. Why Are Humans So Contradictory in Nature?

Humans can be altruistic and compassionate, but we can also be hateful and murderous. "Philosophical Naturalism struggles to explain how creatures capable of genocide and cruelty are also capable of compassion and sacrificial generosity."

What's puzzling? Humans have a large palette of personality traits and drives. They came from evolution, and we're stuck with them, though we can try to adapt to modern Western norms.

These drives, both "good" ones like patience and perseverance and "bad" ones like lust or envy, can be useful. The problem arises when any are used too much.

For example, generosity is a good trait because we

usually aren't generous enough, but you need to be a bit selfish so that you don't damage your own life by giving away too much. Anger is a bad trait because we can be angry too often, but the focus and drive that it gives can be useful occasionally when righting a wrong.

Different conditions create a wide variety of norms (the Nazi prison guard is a classic example) that encourage actions inconceivable in healthy modern society. We don't need to handwave about Mankind's fall to explain the good and bad we see in human actions.

*(The Part 3 conclusion of this essay will appear in May. - JR)*

### **ONE OBVIOUS ANSWER TO A QUESTION ABOUT RELIGION Hemant Mehta, the Friendly Atheist**

*(Excerpted from "What's the Main Source of Global Conflict? Survey Says: 'Religious Beliefs'" on patheos.com, 1/25/18)*

**W**ould eliminating religion from the world make it a better place? You could argue that one from every possible direction and never settle on an answer, but a new survey from *U.S. News & World Report* says that 30 percent of people believe "religious beliefs" are the primary source of global conflict, more than any other option.

According to global survey respondents, the primary source of most global conflicts today are Religious Beliefs (30 percent), followed by Power (23), Economy (21), Political Beliefs (11), Fake News (7), and Other (7). The survey included responses from 21,000 people around the world.

Spiritual beliefs create an inherent "us vs. them" scenario, experts say. "When societies shatter, they generally shatter along tribal lines. People are seeing themselves as irretrievably different from their neighbors," says neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris.

The divisions created by religion are deeper and potentially more harmful than those formed through other aspects of identity such as race, nationality or political affiliations, because they confront individuals with differing opinions on the ultimate purpose of life, experts say. ...

"Religion often becomes the master variable," Harris says. "It provides a unique reward structure. If you believe that the thoughts you harbor in this life and the doctrines you adhere to spell the difference between an eternity spent in fire or one spent on the right hand of God, that raises the stakes beyond any other reward structure on earth."

This is why so many atheists fight against religion. It's not because we're unpatriotic. It's not because we want to single out religious minorities. It's not because we hate God. It's because religion is both wrong and powerful. It ruins lives. Because so many people take their religious beliefs so seriously, and because they can never be disproven, the only way to resolve conflicts is through violence, not reason.

And God is always on the side of the winners, no matter what they believe, which only makes the problem worse.

On a side note, I have no idea why "fake news" is a separate category. That should really be combined with the "religious beliefs" bar.

### **THE WALL WE TRULY NEED Jonathan Engel**

**T**hese days, when people speak of "The Wall", they are not referencing Pink Floyd, unfortunately. No, of course they're talking about Donald Trump's proposed \$20B monument to the greatness of, well, Donald Trump. And so, while the bright-blue eyes of Paul Ryan gleam with the prospect of gutting Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, WIC, SNAP and anything else that might actually help people in need, Trump and his minions will hold hostage whatever is available (including the lives of hundreds of thousands of Dreamers) to gain the billions they need from the Treasury to build a worthless piece of crap.

No, we do not need Trump's wall. There are much more effective (not to mention humane) ways of reforming our immigration system. But there is another wall that has been a feature of our republic since its inception, that is being chipped away on a daily basis. This is the "Wall of Separation Between Church and State" that Thomas Jefferson spoke of so eloquently in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptists. This is the wall that we truly need, and right now it is in danger of dying by a thousand cuts administered by the religious fanatics who have a hold on our government.

From the civil rights organization Americans United for the Separation of Church and State:

"From sweeping new bans that prevent people from entering this country on the basis of religion ... to new restrictions on birth control and personal reproductive choice ... from new attempts to limit the Johnson Amendment so religious groups can endorse candidates ... to allowing religious coercion in public schools ... Donald Trump, Mike Pence and their allies in Congress (and in the states) are going to keep the attacks (on the separation of church and state) coming".

And there's more, including using so-called "religious freedom" laws as a shield for people to discriminate against the LGBTQ community, vouchers to pay for religious schools, allowing overt religious displays in public buildings, etc., the list goes depressingly on and on.

If we are to keep our precious grip on the concept of "liberty and justice for all", we need to keep the wall of separation between church and state strong, secure, and inviolable. Why? Because...

In a land where people are judged worthy or unworthy to cross our borders based on their religious beliefs, liberty and justice die.

In a land where the ability to access the reproductive health care of your choice is crushed by someone else's religious beliefs, liberty and justice die.

In a land where people can hide behind their ancient religious texts to justify discrimination against those they don't like because of their skin color, or sexual orientation, or gender identification, or contrary religious beliefs, liberty and justice die.

In a land where public schools, in which everyone in the community is welcome to receive a first-class secular

education, are starved of funds so that public money can be shifted to schools that indoctrinate their students with one particular religious point of view, liberty and justice die.

In a land where entities (e.g. churches) that receive government support in the form of tax-free status (meaning that they get funds from you and me) to support their own political agendas, liberty and justice die.

In a land that favors certain religious beliefs over others (including non-belief), liberty and justice die.

In the words of James Madison, the author of the Bill of Rights: "During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution."

Trump's wall is built on ignorance, while Madison and Jefferson's wall is built on enlightenment. Which wall, both literally and metaphorically, will America choose? Right now it is impossible to say, but for liberty and justice for all to survive in this country, we must choose wisely.

## **ARMING TEACHERS MAY BE TRUMP'S MOST COLOSSALLY STUPID IDEA EVER**

**John J. Donohue III**

*(Reprinted from "Arming Teachers Is Not a Good Option" at [blogs://scientificamerican.com](https://scientificamerican.com), 2/28/18)*

**W**ith three of the 10 most deadly mass shootings in US history coming in the last five months, Americans are clearly energized about this growing problem that disproportionately plagues the United States.

While there are many steps that are widely popular, such as adopting improved, universal background checks, which could be expected to reduce all mass shootings and much other crime, President Trump has instead focused on the controversial suggestion of arming teachers to prevent school shootings. Unfortunately, this discussion is not being informed by the existing data on both mass shootings and what terminates them or the general information on the impact of increased gun carrying on violent crime.

The FBI analyzed 160 cases of active shooters over the period from 2000-2013, and not one was stopped by a concealed carry permit holder who was not active duty military, a security guard, or a police officer. 21 were stopped by unarmed civilians.

The President's remarks also conveyed a sense that with an armed teacher around, any shooter would quickly be shot and killed, ending the potential tragedy quickly and happily. The real world has not been so neat. There was an armed law enforcement officer present at the time of the 1999 school shooting in Columbine who did engage in a gun battle with the killers but this did not quickly and easily stop the assault. In fact, twelve police officers fired 141 shots at the two killers, none of which hit their targets. Overall, 12 students and one teacher died, and 21 were injured before the two killers committed suicide.

The FBI report also shows that firing on active duty

shooters is also a dangerous enterprise: in 21 of the 45 cases in which police exchanged gun fire, an officer either died (9 officers) or was shot (28 officers). The data from a large array of studies shows that trained police play a critical role in reducing crime, but it is important to note that in active shooter incidents they confront very significant dangers.

The President did indicate that he was not in favor of allowing any teacher with a concealed carry permit to have a gun in school but was referring to more skilled and trained individuals. This is important since the evidence for the average concealed carry individual is that he or she will not be of much help in a mass shooting incident and tends to elevate the risk of violent crime in general. The existing debate does not seem well-informed by the full complexities of increasing the carrying of concealed weapons.

The best empirical evidence suggests that when states adopt right to carry laws, violent crime tends to rise by about 13-15 percent over the next ten years, so the general notion that arming law-abiding citizens to carry guns outside the home will improve safety has no statistical support. There are certainly beneficial uses of guns by permit holders that thwart or even deter crime, but these positive influences are outweighed by all of the ways — often not well understood — in which gun carrying elevates violent crime. In addition to any misconduct by the actual permit holder — such as the mass shooting in 2017 that killed five and wounded six others in the baggage claim area at the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood Airport — gun carrying often leads to lost and stolen guns and occupies the time and complicates the task of law enforcement in ways that undermine their crime-fighting capacities.

I estimate that roughly 100,000 guns are stolen from concealed carry permit holders each year, so any good they do has to be offset by the arming of 100,000 criminals and the violent crimes these armed criminals commit. If Trump's plan were to lead to five armed teachers per school in the roughly 100,000 elementary and secondary schools, this would mean that 500,000 teachers would be bearing arms in school every school day. If they experienced a similar rate of lost and stolen guns as concealed carriers in general, that would suggest they would relinquish roughly 5000 guns per year, which is a threat to the entire community. It also suggests that ... it would be wise to insist that the only guns that teachers could bring to school would be smart guns that could only be fired by the permit holder, as opposed to some unauthorized individual.

Striving to keep guns away from identifiably dangerous individuals through an enhanced and universal background check system and limiting the destructive potential of their weaponry are likely to be critical components of any effective plan designed to reduce gun violence.

## **THINK ABOUT THIS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AS YOU'RE TRYING TO GET TO SLEEP**

**I**n the U.S., gun shops outnumber Starbucks, McDonald's, and all grocery stores combined.

— From *Harper's Weekly Review*, 3/13/18

## LOGIC: TRUMP & NRA STYLE

(Excerpted from *Harper's Weekly Review*, 2/28/18)

Trump said the country must “do something” about how “young people’s thoughts” are shaped by “violence on video games”; and the NRA’s president said that “socialists” wanted to take away Americans’ handguns and semi-automatic rifles so that citizens wouldn’t be able to defend themselves against an attack by the US government, which employs a total of 1,373,650 active-duty personnel; owns 5,884 combat tanks, 41,062 armored vehicles, 1,934 self-propelled artillery guns, 19 aircraft carriers, 63 destroyers, 70 submarines, 2,296 fighter planes, and 947 attack helicopters; maintains a stockpile of 6,800 nuclear bombs, including some that are 80 times more powerful than the bomb the US dropped on Hiroshima during World War II; and operates on a budget of about \$600 billion, which congressional Republicans said should be increased, and which the military used in part to fund Army-themed video games designed to recruit teenagers.

## BY THE WAY, YOUR BIASED LIBERAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GUN OWNERS? YOU’VE BEEN RIGHT ALL ALONG

Martin Cizmar

(Excerpted from “*White Men Stockpile Guns Because They’re Scared of Black People and Feel Inadequate, Science Says*”, on *Raw Story*, 3/15/18)

Who likes guns and why? That’s the subject of a new *Scientific American* article which draws from a number of scientific studies, finding a very specific profile of the average American gun owner. It’s a relatively small group since just three percent of the population owns half of the country’s firearms.

The average gun owner is a white man without much education who is worried about providing for his family and who is afraid of black people.

“These are men who are anxious about their ability to protect their families, insecure about their place in the job market, and beset by racial fears,” *Scientific American* writes. “They tend to be less educated. For the most part, they don’t appear to be religious – and, suggests one study, faith seems to reduce their attachment to guns [emphasis added – Ed]. In fact, stockpiling guns seems to be a symptom of a much deeper crisis in meaning and purpose in their lives.”

A study by the University of Illinois at Chicago also found that racial resentment among whites fueled opposition to gun control. These men also tend to not be right with Jesus. The sociologists found that religious faith tended to stop the attachment to guns.\*

“The gun is a ubiquitous symbol of power and independence,” the sociologist said. “Guns, therefore, provide a way to regain their masculinity, which they perceive has been eroded by increasing economic impotency.”

\**Comment*: Okay, dumb and racist we assumed all along. But Jesus ’n Guns not a match made in heaven? We pointy-headed liberals didn’t expect that. – JR

## BONKERS REPUBLICANS:

### “TRUMP IS A GOOD ROLE MODEL”

Kali Holloway

(From “*Bonkers Poll: 70% of Republicans Think Trump Is a Good Role Model for Children*”, on *AlterNet*, 1/30/18)

Seventy-two percent of Republicans believe that kids should try to follow Donald Trump’s example. That’s neither hyperbolic conjecture nor sarcastic speculation; it’s the truth, according to Republican poll respondents themselves. Quinnipiac University asked 1,245 voting-age adults if they think “Trump is a good role model for children”, and nearly three-quarters of self-identified Republican responded in the affirmative.

In essence, when asked the question of whether America needs more racist narcissists with a fondness for bragging about sexual assault, Republicans mulled the query and overwhelmingly answered Yes.

No other group so decidedly chose to land on the side of calamity and evil, though results were—as politics always are—tied to race. Overall, 99 percent of Democrats said kids shouldn’t look up to Trump, a man who arbitrarily brought up the size of his penis during a televised political debate and who in 1992 told *New York* magazine, “Women? You have to treat ’em like shit.”

Ninety-seven percent of African Americans felt the prospect of more Trumps-in-training would be a bad thing, and 87 percent of Hispanic people agreed with that assessment. But more than a third of both white men and white women, 32 and 37 percent respectively, said Trump is a good role model for America’s future leaders. Among white voters without a college degree, 54 percent see Trump as someone kids should respect and admire. ...

Hypocrisy once again did quite well for itself, carrying the day according to the answers given by conservative respondents. For example, 89 percent of Republicans say that it is “important to [them] that a president be loyal to their spouse”. ... Still, Republicans polled expressed no ethical conflict between Trump’s extramarital behavior and their beliefs. Eighty percent of Republicans say Trump “provides the United States with moral leadership”, and 82 percent say he shares their values. Presumably, 100 percent would answer “no one” if asked, “Who cares about selective outrage now that the president is white again?”

## ANOTHER CAREER CUT SHORT, ANOTHER LIFE RUINED BY A “POLITICALLY CORRECT” RUSH TO JUDGMENT

Massimo Pigliucci

Very, very sad day. A good friend of mine, after seven years of medical school and training, has been fired for one minor indiscretion. He slept with one of his patients and can no longer work in his profession. What a waste of time, effort, training, and money. He’s still paying on his school loans. This just goes to show how one minor mistake can ruin your life. Thoughts for him and his family. He’s a great guy and a brilliant veterinarian. (*April Fool – JR*)

**TRUMP SAYS HES BEEN TREATED  
“VERY UNFAIRLY” BY THE PEOPLE  
WHO WROTE THE CONSTITUTION**

**Andy Borowitz**

*(Excerpted from Newyorker.com, 2/10/17)*

**W**ASHINGTON (The Borowitz Report)—Hinting darkly that “there’s something going on”, Donald J. Trump complained on Friday that he has been treated “very unfairly” by the people who wrote the United States Constitution.

“If the Constitution prevented me from doing one or two things, I’d chalk that up to bad luck,” he said. “But when literally everything I want to do is magically a violation of the Constitution, that’s very unfair and bad treatment.”

Lashing out at the document’s authors, Trump said that “America is a great country, but we have maybe the worst constitution writers in the world.”

“Russia has much better constitution writers than we do,” he said. “I talked to Putin, and he said their constitution never gives him problems.”

In an ominous warning, Trump said that, as of Friday, he was putting the writers of the U.S. Constitution “on notice”.

“I don’t have their names yet, but that’s something I’m looking into,” he said. “These jokers are not going to get away with this.”

**APRIL 22 IS EARTH DAY.**

**LET’S DO MORE THAN CELEBRATE**

**T**he theme of Earth Day 2018 is *End Plastic Pollution*. The exponential growth of plastic pollution is negatively affecting our beaches, wildlife population, and disrupting human hormones. By 2050, it is estimated that there will be more plastic in the world’s oceans than fish.

It’s time to become informed about plastic pollution and take action legislatively, locally, and/or nationally on Earth Day 2018 and beyond. Here are some (edited) suggestions from the AHA related to ending plastic pollution:

**Reuse:** Cut down on disposable items by using reusable bags and containers (i.e., mugs or bottles) when you shop. Tell the supermarket manager (not the checkout clerk) you don’t want plastic bags.

**Refuse:** Stop using plastic straws. Since plastic straws never completely biodegrade, they end up in our oceans and threaten the livelihood of marine animals.

**Reduce:** Instead of plastic utensils or styrofoam containers, use compostable utensils and containers that can help nourish the planet instead of harming it. Encourage the restaurants you patronize to do so, too. (When you order takeout, tell them to not include plastic utensils.)

**Remove:** Remove existing plastic litter where you find it. Start a park clean up event (maybe at our Summer Solstice event in Riverside Park?).

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**Day of Reason Brunch  
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