

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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February, 2019

## Darwin Day Celebration & Banquet Feb 8, with David Orenstein - Page 7

February: the very definition of “dead of winter”. So curl up someplace warm with this. Test your knowledge of religious idiocy, measure unbelief with the Great Greta and other Smart People, check out the new Congress and our Freethought Caucus, and write your Rep today (*see page 5!*). And let’s start working, organizing, contributing, demonstrating to get rid of the horror in the Oval. —JR

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### THE PRESIDENT MUST GO

David Leonhardt

(Excerpted from “*The People vs. Donald J. Trump*”, The New York Times, 1/5/2019)

The presidential oath of office contains 35 words and one core promise: to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States”. Since virtually the moment Donald J. Trump took that oath two years ago, he has been violating it.



He has repeatedly put his own interests above those of the country. He has used the presidency to promote his businesses. He has accepted financial gifts from foreign countries. He has lied to the American people about his relationship with a hostile foreign government. He has tolerated cabinet officials who use their position to enrich themselves.

To shield himself from accountability for all of this — and for his unscrupulous presidential campaign — he has set out to undermine the American system of checks and balances. He has called for the prosecution of his political enemies and the protection of his allies. He has attempted to obstruct justice. He has tried to shake the public’s confidence in one democratic institution after another, including the press, federal law enforcement and the federal judiciary.

The unrelenting chaos that Trump creates can sometimes obscure the big picture. But the big picture is simple: The United States has never had a president as demonstrably unfit for the office as Trump. And it’s becoming clear that 2019 is likely to be dominated by a single question: What are we going to do about it?

The easy answer is to wait — to allow the various investigations of Trump to run their course and ask voters to deliver a verdict in 2020. That answer has one great advantage. It would avoid the national trauma of overturning an election result. Ultimately, however, waiting is too dangerous. The cost of removing a president from office is smaller than the cost of allowing this president to remain.

He has already shown, repeatedly, that he will hurt the country in order to help himself. He will damage American interests around the world and damage vital parts of our constitutional system at home. The risks that he will cause much more harm are growing.

Some of the biggest moderating influences have recently left the administration. The defense secretary who defended our alliances with NATO and South Korea is gone. So is the attorney general who refused to let Trump subvert a federal investigation into himself. The administration is increasingly filled with lackeys and enablers. Trump has become freer to turn his whims into policy — like, say, shutting down the government on the advice of Fox News hosts or pulling troops from Syria on the advice of a Turkish autocrat.

The biggest risk may be that an external emergency — a war, a terrorist attack, a financial crisis, an immense natural disaster — will arise. By then, it will be too late to pretend that he is anything other than manifestly unfit to lead.

For the country’s sake, there is only one acceptable outcome, just as there was after Americans realized in 1974 that a criminal was occupying the Oval Office.

The president must go.

(*Editor: Read the full article at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/05/opinion/sunday/trump-impeachment.html>*)

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## WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE ...

Michael Flynn: *GUILTY*  
George Papadopoulos: *GUILTY*  
Alex van der Zwaan: *GUILTY*  
Rick Gates: *GUILTY*  
Richard Pinedo: *GUILTY*  
Paul Manafort: *GUILTY*  
Michael Cohen: *GUILTY*

I'm no lawyer, but I'd guess the guy for whom all these criminals did crimes is probably innocent.

– Zack Bornstein on *funnyordie.com*

## FAKE, PHONEY, FOUR-FLUSHER

Patrick Radden Keefe

(Excerpted from "Winning", in *The New Yorker*, 1/7/2019)

Trump had been a celebrity since the eighties, his persona shaped by the best selling book *The Art of the Deal*. But his business had floundered, and by 2003 he had become a garish figure of local interest – a punch line on Page Six. "The Apprentice" mythologized him anew, and on a much bigger scale, turning him into an icon of American success. ... [Producer Mark Burnett's] chief legacy is to have cast a serially bankrupt carnival barker in the role of a man who might plausibly become the leader of the free world. ...

"The Apprentice" was built around a weekly series of business challenges. At the end of each episode, Trump determined which competitor would be "fired". But, as [editor Jonathon] Braun explained, Trump was frequently unprepared for the sessions, with little grasp of who had performed well. Sometimes a candidate distinguished herself during the contest only to get fired, on a whim, by Trump. When this happened, Braun said, the editors were often obliged to "reverse engineer" the episode, scouring hundreds of hours of footage to emphasize a few moments when the exemplary candidate might have slipped up, in an attempt to assemble an artificial version of history in which Trump's shoot-from-the-hip decision made sense. ... Braun noted ... "I find it strangely validating to hear that they're doing the same thing in the White House." ...

"The Apprentice" portrayed Trump not as a skeezy hustler who huddles with local mobsters but as a plutocrat with impeccable business instincts and unparalleled wealth – a Titan who always seemed to be climbing out of helicopters or into limousines. "Most of us knew he was a fake," Braun told me. "He had just gone through I don't know how many bankruptcies. But we made him out to be the most important person in the world. It was like making the court jester the king."

Bill Pruitt, another producer, recalled, "We walked through the offices and saw chipped furniture. We saw a crumbling empire at every turn. Our job was to make it seem otherwise."

Trump is a stupid man's idea of a smart person, a poor man's idea of a rich person and a weak man's idea of a strong man. – Fran Lebowitz

## TO DEAL WITH TRUMP, LOOK TO VOLTAIRE

Robert Darnton

(Excerpted from "To Deal With Trump, Look to Voltaire", at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) 12/27/2018)

Advice from the Enlightenment: In the face of crude bullying and humorless lies, try wit and a passion for justice.

We are living through a climate change in politics. Bigotry, bullying, mendacity, vulgarity – everything emitted by the tweets of President Trump and amplified by his followers has damaged the atmosphere of public life. The protective layer of civility, which makes political discourse possible, is disappearing like the ozone around Earth.

How can we restore a healthy climate? There is no easy answer, but some historic figures offer edifying examples. The one I propose may seem unlikely, but he transformed the climate of opinion in his era: Voltaire, the French philosopher who mobilized the power of Enlightenment principles in 18th-century Europe.

O.K., I know that only an academic like myself would come up with such a proposition. Who in the United States has any interest in Voltaire? College students sometimes read his *Candide* as a novella, and audiences have enjoyed it as an operetta by Leonard Bernstein. But the book ends with a refrain that sounds like quietism: "Let us cultivate our garden."

Actually, I think that last line, which is among the most famous in all literature, should be understood as a call to engagement. "Cultivation" means commitment to culture, to civility, to civilization itself. That is the argument I want to make.

To those encountering him for the first time, Voltaire can look like a historical curiosity. His archaic wig and libertine wit seem to belong to a forgotten corner of the past. Moreover, he can be considered a conservative. He curried favor with the high and mighty, especially Louis XV. He was so deeply committed to the cultural system developed under France's previous ruler, Louis XIV, that he would fail any test of political correctness today. And Voltaire opposed education for the masses because, he said, someone had to tend the fields.

So, forget the wig. But reconsider the wit. Nothing works better than ridicule in cutting bigots down to size. "I have never made but one prayer to God," Voltaire wrote, "a very short one: 'O Lord, make my enemies ridiculous.' And God granted it." The first of the two most powerful weapons in his arsenal was laughter: "We must get the laughter on our side," he instructed his auxiliary troops in the salons.

Ridicule works outside salons. We in America have Stephen Colbert on television. We had H.L. Mencken in the newspapers and Mark Twain in books. Yet wit can sound elitist, and Voltaire cultivated the elite, especially in his youth, when he celebrated wealth, pleasure and the good things of life. His poem "*Le Mondain*," written in 1736, is an apology for worldly luxury – "the superfluous, a very necessary thing", he wrote, in opposition to Christian asceticism.

## GAINING RESPECT, ONE PERSON AT A TIME

### Jonathan Engel

That was Voltaire the young libertine. But now, in our contemporary crisis, I propose that we look also to Voltaire the angry old man. It was in his old age, during the 1760s and 1770s, that he wielded his second and most powerful weapon, moral passion.

In 1762 Voltaire learned about a case of judicial murder. The *Parlement* (high court) of Toulouse had condemned a Protestant, Jean Calas, to be tortured and executed for supposedly killing his son, who supposedly had intended to convert to Catholicism. Not only were the suppositions wrong, but strong evidence pointed to Calas's innocence.

To Voltaire, the case represented far more than a miscarriage of justice. It epitomized atrocities that had been inflicted on Protestants for two centuries. They had been slaughtered, driven out of the country, forced to convert to Catholicism and deprived of civil rights, including the rights to marry and inherit property within the law. Beyond the persecution of Protestants, Voltaire saw intolerance in general, and beyond intolerance, barbarism.

Voltaire seized his pen. He composed the "Treatise on Tolerance", one of the greatest defenses of religious liberty and civil rights ever written. He also wrote letters, hundreds of them, to all his contacts in the power elite — ministers, courtiers, salon leaders and fellow philosophers, working from the top down and manipulating the media of his day so skillfully that he created a tidal wave of public opinion, which would ultimately lead to the recognition of rights for Protestants in 1787, nine years after he died.

Voltaire ended many of those letters with a rallying cry, "*Écrasez l'infâme*" — "Crush the vile thing." For him, the meaning of "*l'infâme*" could be extended from intolerance to superstition and injustices of all kinds. The opposing notion of tolerance shaded off into broader values, including civility — the virtue that we need so much today and that Voltaire identified with civilization. Voltaire saw the triumph of civilization over barbarity as the ultimate good inscribed in the historical process. He made the message clear in his most ambitious work, "*Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*" — "Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations" — a survey of world history that he first published in 1756 and revised and expanded until his death in 1778.

What more can we aspire to in the age of Trump? The opposition to bigotry and the defense of civil rights once again call for a commitment to the cause of civilization. They require moral passion seasoned with wit.

Cultivate gardens. *Écrasez l'infâme*.

When we fully understand the brevity of life, its fleeting joys and unavoidable pains; when we accept the fact that all men and women are approaching an inevitable doom; the consciousness of it should make us more kindly and considerate of each other.

This feeling should make men and women use their best efforts to help their fellow travelers on the road, to make the path brighter and easier ... for the wayfarers who must live a common life and die a common death.

— Clarence Darrow

I had an interesting experience on New Year's Eve. My wife and I were invited to a small gathering by some friends of ours. The only people we knew were the hosts. As is typical in such getting-to-know-you type conversations, someone asked me what I do. I told them the basics of my somewhat messy professional life (lawyer, trustee, consultant, writer; I do a lot of stuff), and then I mentioned that I'm on the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. Somebody else asked what secular humanism is, and so I gave a brief explanation, which included the fact that secular humanists are not religious. One of the other guests then said, somewhat under her breath, "I hope you're not one of those god-haters."

Hmmm. How to handle this? I felt it would have been disheartening to our hosts if I really got into it with this woman. But on the other hand I was very taken aback that a seemingly educated, sophisticated woman, living in New York, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, was so ignorant of secularism. I was also pretty annoyed that she felt it was okay to piss on my beliefs.

We're always told that we must be respectful of others' religious beliefs, to the point where one would be criticized for politely questioning how an educated, 21st century person can go on believing in the supernatural. But for some reason it's acceptable to denigrate atheists and other secularists. And I'm not talking about respectful debate here. I would be happy to have a substantive conversation with anyone on secular humanist versus religious beliefs. But "I hope you're not one of those god-haters" doesn't exactly sound like an invitation to a reasoned discussion.

Anyway, back to New Year's Eve and perhaps a tiny smidgen of hope. My response to the lady in question was, "I try not to hate anybody, although the orange menace in the White House doesn't make it easy." Our host then said something like "maybe we shouldn't go there", and so we both dropped it, although there was plenty more I wanted to say, including, "I'm sure you don't believe in the tooth fairy, but you don't hate the tooth fairy, do you? Why would I hate something I don't believe exists?" Probably with a few expletives thrown in for good measure, but again, I didn't want to upset our hosts or the other guests.

Here's where the tiny bit of hope comes in. I spent the rest of the evening turning on my charm (such as it is) for the woman who was worried that I might be a "god-hater". And by the time we left, I think she might actually have come to like me. So maybe, just maybe, I persuaded one person that there's nothing to fear from their secular brethren. Which is why it's important that our friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, etc. know about our secular beliefs. It's a lot harder to be dismissive of people if you actually know them.

I don't expect religious people to agree with me, or even to respect my worldview (nor I theirs). But they do have to respect me as a person, and my right to believe what I believe.

## IS ATHEISM NO LONGER A POLITICAL TABOO?

*(Excerpted from “Atheism is No Longer a Political Taboo”, at americanhumanist.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SurveyReport.pdf. Read the whole report at that site. – JR)*

The US Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office. However, being an atheist in politics has been a powerful political taboo in our nation. New research finds that this bias against candidates who don't believe in God has notably weakened. A poll conducted by Lake Research Partners for the American Humanist Association and the Center for Freethought Equality and funded by the Stiefel Freethought Foundation shows that being nonreligious, agnostic, or atheist need not be considered an impediment to a candidate's electoral success.

Talking with candidates running in the 2018 midterm election about the political cost of identifying as an atheist was the impetus for the poll. A candidate in a very red district, where the last Democratic opponent received less than 20 percent of the vote against the Republican incumbent, said he couldn't possibly identify as an atheist because he couldn't afford to lose any more voters. He said he automatically lost voters by identifying as a Democrat, more since he is pro-choice, and even more with his support of LGBTQ equality. This begged the question: Would the supporters of a pro-choice, LGBTQ equality Democrat care if their candidate was also an atheist? Reliable data was needed to answer this question.

The survey results show that a candidate's atheism is a non-issue – or even a plus – for pro-choice, pro-marriage-equality Democratic voters, fully 74 percent of whom saying a candidate being “not religious” or “agnostic” would make no difference in their vote, and 72 percent saying a candidate's “atheism” would make no difference in their vote. Among those with a preference for a nonreligious/agnostic candidate, 14 percent are more likely to vote for him/her (including 10 percent much more likely) and 7 percent are less likely (including 4 percent much less likely); the difference is modest among those voters with an inclination toward an atheist candidate: 10 percent are more likely to vote for him/her (8 percent much more likely) and 13 percent are less likely (7 percent much less likely). Nontheistic, progressive Democrats in non-swing districts should no longer feel hesitant to be public about their religious identity. And while it still could be a challenging factor in swing districts, it's no longer the taboo it once was. ...

Although the bias against nonbelievers is diminishing, the Lake Research poll demonstrated that the bias still exists. When asked to choose between a candidate who believes in God or a candidate who does not believe in God, respondents strongly chose the believer – with 60 percent supporting the candidate who believes in God and only 6 percent supporting the candidate who doesn't, while for 31 percent of the voters it made no difference (3 percent were undecided or did not know). These results were markedly different by political party affiliation: 46 percent of Democrats voted for the believer (10 percent supported the nonbeliever and 41 percent were indifferent) compared to 81

percent of Republicans voting for the believer (3 percent for nonbeliever, 15 percent no difference). For those independent respondents who did not identify with either major party, the results were more in line with Democratic voters (48 percent voting for the believer, 5 percent voting for the nonbeliever, and 42 percent having no preference).

However, this preference for candidates who believe in God nearly disappears when policy stances are included in the question. Surprisingly, this holds true for Republicans as well. When asked if they would vote for a candidate who stood for most of the things they believed in but who didn't believe in God or who was nonreligious, versus a candidate who was religious but didn't stand for most of the things they did, 60 percent of respondents chose the nonbeliever and 24 percent chose the religious candidate.

## BUT SECULARISM IN THE NEW CONGRESS? NOT MUCH TO CHEER ABOUT

*(Excerpted from “Faith on the Hill: The religious composition of the 116th Congress”, on pewforum.org, 1/3/2019)*

The new, 116th Congress ... is, overall, slightly more religiously diverse than the prior Congress. There has been a 3-percentage-point decline in the share of members of Congress who identify as Christian – in the 115th Congress, 91 percent of members were Christian, while in the 116th, 88 percent are Christian. There are also four more Jewish members, one additional Muslim and one more Unitarian Universalist in the new Congress – as well as eight more members who decline to state their religious affiliation (or lack thereof).

While the number of self-identified Christians in Congress has ticked down, Christians as a whole – and especially Protestants and Catholics – are still overrepresented in proportion to their share in the general public. Indeed, the religious makeup of the new, 116th Congress is very different from that of the United States population. ...

By far the largest difference between the U.S. public and Congress is in the share who are unaffiliated with a religious group. In the general public, 23 percent say they are atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular”. In Congress, just one person – Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., who was recently elected to the Senate after three terms in the House – says she is religiously unaffiliated, making the share of “nones” in Congress 0.2 percent.

When asked about their religious affiliation, a growing number of members of Congress decline to specify (categorized as “don't know/refused”). This group – all Democrats – numbers 18, or 3 percent of Congress, up from 10 members (2 percent). ... One member in this category, Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., announced in 2017 that he identifies as a humanist and says he is not sure God exists. Huffman remains categorized as “don't know/refused” because he declined to state his religious identity in the CQ Roll Call questionnaire used to collect data for this report.

*Comment: Of the 252 Republicans in the new, 116th Congress (199 representatives, 53 senators), 2 are Jewish. All the rest are Christians. – JR*

**DO IT TODAY!  
URGE YOUR REPRESENTATIVE TO JOIN  
THE CONGRESSIONAL FREETHOUGHT CAUCUS.**

**John Rafferty**

The Congressional Freethought Caucus (CFC) was formed by just three Democratic Representatives in the last Congress: Rep. Jared Huffman (D-CA), Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD), and Rep. Jerry McNerney (D-CA).

Other members at the beginning or who joined shortly thereafter included: Rep. Dan Kildee (D-MI), Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI), and Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA).

Now the Freedom From Religion Foundation notes that there are even more House members who have joined in the past few months, bringing the total number up to ten: Rep. Steve Cohen (D-TN), Rep. Hank Johnson (D-GA), Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), and Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.).

Notice, please, two things about that lineup of members. First, that they're all Democrats (well, duh). And more important to the concerns of SHSNY, that there is not yet a single member from New York, New Jersey, or Connecticut – our bailiwick.

Let's fix that. I urge, implore, *demand* that you take ten minutes out of your day – today! – to write to your Representative in the House, urging that she/he join the CFC.

Want a template for your letter? Here's one:

January 16, 2019

Hon. Carolyn Maloney  
U.S. House of Representatives  
1651 Third Avenue #311, New York, NY 10128

Dear Ms. Maloney:

I write you as a constituent to urge you to join Rep. Jared Huffman and nine others of your fellow Representatives who have formed the Congressional Freethought Caucus.

The mission of the caucus is “to promote public policy formed on the basis of reason, science, and moral values; to protect the secular character of our government by adhering to the strict Constitutional principle of the separation of church and state; to oppose discrimination against atheists, agnostics, humanists, seekers, religious and nonreligious persons, and to champion the value of freedom of thought and conscience worldwide; and to provide a forum for members of Congress to discuss their moral frameworks, ethical values, and personal religious journeys.”

Based on your voting record and public statements, I am certain that you agree with that mission statement, and that you belong in the Congressional Freethought Caucus. Please join it, and encourage more of your freethinking colleagues to do the same.

Cordially,

John D. Rafferty

P.S.: I am also President of the Secular Humanist Society of New York ([www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org)), and am urging our 170 dues-paid members to write similar letters to their representatives.

**WALL STREET'S BIGGEST OF THE BIG  
JUST HAD THEIR BIGGEST YEAR EVER.  
DOESN'T THAT JUST MAKE YOU  
TINGLE WITH PRIDE TO BE AN AMERICAN?**

**John Rafferty**

For the first time in history, the six biggest Wall Street banks – JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Citigroup, Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley – made \$100 billion in profit in a year.

“They have Republican tax cuts to thank,” says *Bloomberg News*, which also points out that “The record haul will provide fodder for critics of the 2017 U.S. tax overhaul who argue that it's a bigger boon for major companies and fat-cat shareholders than for the middle class” ... like the people who actually work on Wall Street.

Within the banks, profit at the firms jumped 28 percent from the previous high, while employee compensation expenses climbed just 1.8 percent from last year.

While I have been leery of some of the showboating of the media's current “It Girl”, Wall Street critic Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, I am more than glad she is headed to the Congressional committee that oversees the industry.

“As I've said before,” she tweeted a few hours after Goldman and BofA reported their results, “it's People vs Money. We've got people, they've got money.”

“There is work to do.”

**SAUDIS GET AWAY WITH MURDER, AGAIN.  
THIS TIME IN AMERICA.**

**John Rafferty**

*(Based on reports in The Daily Mail (UK) and on Daily KOS)*

In August, 2016, 15-year-old Fallon Smart was crossing Hawthorne Blvd in Portland, Oregon, when she was hit by a gold Lexus that illegally swerved and sped around traffic that was stopped to allow the girl to cross the road.

Abdulrahman Sameer Noorah was driving with a suspended license and had 17 parking violations. He was a student at Portland Community College, living off an \$1,850 a month allowance provided by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which also posted \$100,000 – the 10 percent of \$1 million required to release him on bail.

Then Noorah skipped.

Ten days before he was to stand trial, Noorah packed a bag, was picked up by a private black GMC Yukon XL car that drove him two miles to a sand-and-gravel yard, where he cut off the tracking device on his ankle before beginning his journey home by private jet, carrying a fake passport.

The Saudi government has confirmed to US Marshals this July that Noorah had returned to Saudi Arabia by June 17, 2017, just seven days after he went missing.

In letters to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and acting attorney general Matthew Whitaker, Oregon senator Ron Wyden has repeatedly asked what the Trump administration will do after Saudi Arabia allegedly (and obviously) helped one of their citizen's flee the US.

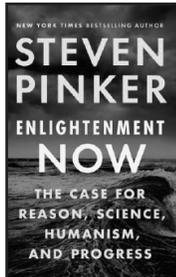
The answer is: nothing.

# SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2019

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB THURS, FEB 7, 7-8:30 pm THE COMMUNITY CHURCH OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)  
We'll discuss  
**ENLIGHTENMENT NOW:**  
*The Case for Reason,  
Science, Humanism  
and Progress*  
**Steven Pinker**

If you follow the headlines, today's world seems to be sinking into chaos, hatred and irrationality. But is modernity really failing? Or have we failed to appreciate progress and the ideals that make it possible?



Embracing the values of the Enlightenment: reason, science, humanism and progress, Pinker makes the case for an Enlightenment newly recharged for the twenty-first century, using our faculties of reason and sympathy to overcome the problems that inevitably come with being products of evolution in an indifferent universe. We will never have a perfect world, but – defying the chorus of fatalism and reaction – we can continue to make it a better one.

John Rafferty will lead.

– *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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[www.meetup.com/shsnny-org/](http://www.meetup.com/shsnny-org/)

## TEXT US ON TWITTER

@SHS\_NewYork

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB THURS, MARCH 7, 7-8:30 pm Community Church of New York **ALPHA GOD:**

*The Psychology of Religious  
Violence and Oppression*  
**Hector A. Garcia**

In this by the speaker who fascinated us November 2, "God" is seen as a reflection of the "dominant ape" paradigm so evident in the hierarchical structures of primates, our cousins.

The parallels between features of primate society and human religious rituals and concepts – in-group altruism vs. out-group hostility (us vs. them), displays of dominance and submission to establish roles – make it clear that religion, especially its oppressive and violent tendencies, is rooted in the deep evolutionary past.

Karen Chamberlain will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB THURS, APRIL 4, 7-8:30 pm Community Church of New York **THE EPIGENETICS REVOLUTION:**

*How Modern Biology is  
Rewriting Our Understanding  
of Genetics, Disease and  
Inheritance*  
**Nessa Carey**

Epigenetics can potentially revolutionize our understanding of the structure and behavior of biological life on Earth.

It explains why mapping an organism's genetic code is not enough to determine how it develops or acts, and shows how nurture combines with nature to engineer biological diversity.

Earle Bowers will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

## BRUNCH & CONVERSATION SUN, FEB 17, 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 \$15 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:  
Could socialism ever succeed  
in the U.S.?*

## DRINKING REASONABLY WED, FEB 20, 6-10:00 pm Vino Levantino Wine Bar 210 West 94 Street

(Broadway - Amsterdam Ave)

Get together with other NYC freethinkers in the various groups of the Reasonable New York coalition (including SHSNY) for fellowship, networking, pub grub and reasonable imbibing.



We – humanists, skeptics, rationalists, atheists, agnostics – meet and mingle, discuss the issues of the day and whatever else is on our minds, and just have fun.

Come anytime for any length of time 6-10, or come at 6:00 and enjoy Happy Hour prices until 7:00.

Don't drink alcohol? Don't let that stop you from joining in the conversation and the fun.

# SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2019

## GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, FEB 27, 7 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

SCIENCE, RELIGION, MORALITY

Michael Shermer

Shermer tackles two of the most challenging problems of our age: the origins of morality, and the foundations of ethics. Is it in our nature to be moral, immoral, or amoral? If we live in a determined universe, then how can we make free moral choices? Can we be good without god?

Shermer examines how we can construct an ethical system that generates a morality that is neither dogmatically absolute nor irrationally relative, a rational morality for an age of science.

## SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB

TUES, FEB 12, 7:00 - 8:30 pm

Nancy Adelman's apartment

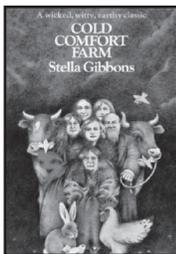
205 Third Ave (6H) (18-19 Sts)

Come for wine, cheese, and sparkling conversation about

**COLD COMFORT FARM**

Stella Gibbons

Claire Miller will lead the discussion of this "deliriously entertaining" parody of D.H. Lawrence's and Thomas Hardy's melodramatic novels. NPR says *Cold Comfort Farm* is "one of the funniest satirical novels of the last century".



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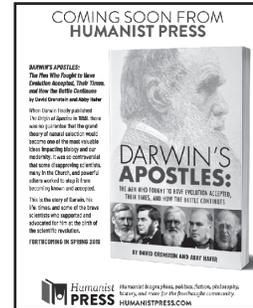
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Golden Unicorn Restaurant, 18 East Broadway

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**Freethought's Apical Ancestor"**



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## RELIGION'S SMART-PEOPLE PROBLEM

### Part 1

John G. Messerly

*(Excerpted from "Religion has a smart-people problem: The shaky intellectual foundations of absolute faith" at rawstory.com, 1/14/2019 ... and Forwarded by Jon Engel)*

Should you believe in a God? Not according to most academic philosophers. A comprehensive survey revealed that only about 14 percent of English speaking professional philosophers are theists. As for what little religious belief remains among their colleagues, most professional philosophers regard it as a strange aberration among otherwise intelligent people. Among scientists the situation is much the same. Surveys of the members of the National Academy of Sciences, composed of the most prestigious scientists in the world, show that religious belief among them is practically nonexistent, about 7 percent.

Now nothing definitely follows about the truth of a belief from what the majority of philosophers or scientists think. But such facts might cause believers discomfort. There has been a dramatic change in the last few centuries in the proportion of believers among the highly educated in the Western world. In the European Middle Ages belief in a God was ubiquitous, while today it is rare among the intelligentsia. This change occurred primarily because of the rise of modern science and a consensus among philosophers that arguments for the existence of gods, souls, afterlife and the like were unconvincing. Still, despite the view of professional philosophers and world-class scientists, religious beliefs have a universal appeal. What explains this?

Genes and environment explain human beliefs and behaviors—people do things because they are genomes in environments. The near universal appeal of religious belief suggests a biological component to religious beliefs and practices, and science increasingly confirms this view. There is a scientific consensus that our brains have been subject to natural selection. So what survival and reproductive roles might religious beliefs and practices have played in our evolutionary history? What mechanisms caused the mind to evolve toward religious beliefs and practices?

Today there are two basic explanations offered. One says that religion evolved by natural selection—religion is an adaptation that provides an evolutionary advantage. For example, religion may have evolved to enhance social cohesion and cooperation—it may have helped groups survive.

The other explanation claims that religious beliefs and practices arose as byproducts of other adaptive traits. For example, intelligence is an adaptation that aids survival. Yet it also forms causal narratives for natural occurrences and postulates the existence of other minds. Thus the idea of hidden Gods explaining natural events was born.

In addition to the biological basis for religious belief, there are environmental explanations. It is self-evident from the fact that religions are predominant in certain geographical areas but not others, that birthplace strongly influences religious belief. This suggests that people's religious beliefs

are, in large part, accidents of birth. Besides cultural influences there is the family; the best predictor of people's religious beliefs in individuals is the religiosity of their parents. There are also social factors effecting religious belief. For example, a significant body of scientific evidence suggests that popular religion results from social dysfunction. Religion may be a coping mechanism for the stress caused by the lack of a good social safety net—hence the vast disparity between religious belief in Western Europe and the United States.

There is also a strong correlation between religious belief and various measures of social dysfunction, including homicides, the proportion of people incarcerated, infant mortality, sexually transmitted diseases, teenage births, abortions, corruption, income inequality and more. While no causal relationship has been established, a United Nations list of the 20 best countries to live in shows the least religious nations generally at the top. Only in the United States, which was ranked as the 13th best country to live in, is religious belief strong relative to other countries. Moreover, virtually all the countries with comparatively little religious belief ranked high on the list of best countries, while the majority of countries with strong religious belief ranked low.

While correlation does not equal causation, the evidence should give pause to religion's defenders. There are good reasons to doubt that religious belief makes people's lives go better, and good reasons to believe that they make their lives go worse.

Despite all this most people still accept some religious claims. But this fact doesn't give us much reason to accept religious claims. People believe many weird things that are completely irrational—astrology, fortunetelling, alien abductions, telekinesis and mind reading—and reject claims supported by an overwhelming body of evidence—biological evolution for example. More than three times as many Americans believe in the virgin birth of Jesus than in biological evolution, although few theologians take the former seriously, while no serious biologist rejects the latter!

Consider too that scientists don't take surveys of the public to determine whether relativity or evolutionary theory are true; their truth is assured by the evidence as well as by resulting technologies—global positioning and flu vaccines work. With the wonders of science every day attesting to its truth, why do many prefer superstition and pseudo science? The simplest answer is that people believe what they want to, what they find comforting, not what the evidence supports: In general, people don't want to know; they want to believe. This best summarizes why people tend to believe.

Why, then, do some highly educated people believe religious claims?

*(Why, indeed? We will examine some of Mr. Messerly's answers to the question in March PIQUE. – JR)*

Were apes—do apes go anyplace when they die?

—Rodney Dangerfield

## PEOPLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY BELIEVE THESE 20 IDIOCIES. HOW MANY CAN YOU IDENTIFY?

Valerie Tarico

*(Excerpted from "Here are the 20 weirdest religious beliefs. Test your knowledge of which strange belief belongs to which religion" on AlterNet.com, 1/14/2019)*

We find it easy to dismiss the fantastical beliefs of people in other times and places, but those that we've been exposed to since childhood seem not so far out. Virgin birth? Water turning into wine? A fig tree shriveling on the spot? Dead people getting up out of their graves and walking around?

All of the following beliefs are found in respected religions today. ... Some of these beliefs are enshrined in sacred texts. Others are simply traditional. All, at one time or another, have had the sanction of the highest church authorities, and many still do. How many of them can you match up with a familiar religious tradition?

1. The foreskin of [a holy one] may lie safeguarded in reliquaries made of gold and crystal and inlaid with gems, or it may have ascended into the heavens all by itself. (2)
2. A race of giants once roamed the earth, the result of women and demi-gods interbreeding. (1, 6) They lived at the same time as fire-breathing dragons. (1)
3. Evil spirits can take control of pigs. (1)
4. A talking donkey scolded a prophet. (1, 3)
5. A righteous man can control his wife's access to eternal paradise. (6)
6. Brown skin is a punishment for disobeying God. (6)
7. A prophet once traveled between two cities on a miniature flying horse with the face of a woman and the tail of a peacock. (4)
8. [The Holy One] forbids a cat or dog receiving a blood transfusion and forbids blood meal being used as garden fertilizer. (7)
9. Sacred underwear protects believers from spiritual contamination and, according to some adherents, from fire and speeding bullets (6)
10. When certain rites are performed beforehand, bread turns into human flesh after it is swallowed. (2)
11. Invisible supernatural beings reveal themselves in mundane objects like oozing paint or cooking food. (2)
12. In the end times, [the Holy One's] chosen people will be gathered together in Jackson County, Missouri. (6)
13. Believers can drink poison or get bitten by snakes without being harmed. (1)
14. Sprinkling water on a newborn, if done correctly, can keep the baby from eons of suffering should he or she die prematurely. (2)
15. Waving a chicken over your head can take away your sins. (3)
16. [A holy one] climbed a mountain and could see the whole earth from the mountain peak. (1, 2)
17. Putting a dirty milk glass and a plate from a roast beef sandwich in the same dishwasher can contaminate your soul. (3)
18. There will be an afterlife in which exactly 144,000

people get to live eternally in Paradise. (8)

19. Each human being contains many alien spirits that were trapped in volcanos by hydrogen bombs. (5)

20. [A supernatural being] cares tremendously what you do with your penis. (1,2,3,4,6,7,8.)

**Key:** 1-Evangelical or "Bible Believing" Christianity; 2-Catholic Christianity; 3-Judaism; 4-Islam; 5-Scientology; 6-Mormonism; 7-Christian Science; 8-Jehovah's Witness.

Each of these beliefs is remarkable in its own way. But the composite goes beyond remarkable to revealing. What it reveals is an underlying belief that is something like this: The process that produced this world and human life is best unveiled not by the scientific method but by the musings of iron age herdsmen (1,2,3,4,7,8) or science fiction writers (5), or con artists (6) whose theories are best judged by examining only assertions that cannot be falsified.

Underlying that belief is a sort of rational Swiss cheese that is going to keep cognitive scientists investigating and arguing for decades. We humans are astoundingly susceptible to handed down nonsense. Human children are dependent on their parents for a decade or even two, which is why nature made children credulous. When parents say, eat your peas, they're good for you, kids may argue about the eat your peas part but they don't usually question the factual assertion about nutrition. When parents say Noah put all of the animals into the ark, it is the rare child who asks, "Why didn't the lion eat the guinea pigs?"

Even as adults, we simply can't afford to research everything we hear and read, and so, unless something isn't working for us, we tend to accept what we are told by trusted authority figures. We go with the flow. Religion exploits this tendency by, among other things, establishing hierarchy and by ensuring that believers are in a certain mindset when they encounter religious ideas. A friend once gave me a button that said, "Don't pray in my school and I won't think in your church." I didn't really want to wear a button that said "I'm an arrogant jerk," but the reality is that even the best of churches aren't optimized for critical thinking. Quite the opposite. The pacing, the music, the lighting—all are designed for assent and emotion, for a right brain aesthetic experience, for the dominance of what Nobel prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman has called System 1 thinking, meaning intuition and gut feel rather than rational, slow, linear analysis.

Some of our ancestors were doing the best they could to understand the world around them but had a very limited set of tools at their disposal. It would appear that others were simply making stuff up.

Mormonism and Scientology appear to fall in the latter camp. But when it comes to religious credulity, the difference matters surprisingly little. For example, Mormonism is more easily debunked than most other religions, both because of its recency and because it makes so many historically or scientifically wild claims, and yet it is also one of the fastest growing religions in the world proportional to its membership. Wild claims matter less than whether a religion has certain viral characteristics.

## HERE ARE THE TOP 10 REASONS I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD

(Reasons 1 & 2)

Greta Christina

(Editor: The Great Greta has a new book, *Why Are You Atheists So Angry? 99 Things That Piss Off the Godless*, which is currently available electronically on Kindle, Nook, and soon in print. The following, and subsequent excerpts in future issues of PIQUE, are/will be from Ms. Christina's post on AlterNet, 12/14/2018.)

*"But just because religion has done some harm – that doesn't mean it's mistaken! Sure, people have done terrible things in God's name. That doesn't mean God doesn't exist!"*

**Y**up. If you're arguing that – you're absolutely right. And the question of whether religion is true or not is important. It's not the main point of this book. ... But "Does God exist?" is a valid and relevant question. Here are my Top Ten reasons why the answer is a resounding, "No."

### **1: The consistent replacement of supernatural explanations of the world with natural ones.**

When you look at the history of what we know about the world, you see a noticeable pattern. Natural explanations of things have been replacing supernatural explanations of them. Like a steamroller. Why the Sun rises and sets. Where thunder and lightning come from. Why people get sick. Why people look like their parents. How the complexity of life came into being. I could go on and on.

All these things were once explained by religion. But as we understood the world better, and learned to observe it more carefully, the explanations based on religion were replaced by ones based on physical cause and effect. Consistently. Thoroughly. Like a steamroller. The number of times that a supernatural explanation of a phenomenon has been replaced by a natural explanation? Thousands upon thousands upon thousands.

Now. The number of times that a natural explanation of a phenomenon has been replaced by a supernatural one? The number of times humankind has said, "We used to think (X) was caused by physical cause and effect, but now we understand that it's caused by God, or spirits, or demons, or the soul"?

Exactly zero.

Sure, people come up with new supernatural "explanations" for stuff all the time. But explanations with evidence? Replicable evidence? Carefully gathered, patiently tested, rigorously reviewed evidence? Internally consistent evidence? Large amounts of it, from many different sources? Again – exactly zero.

Given that this is true, what are the chances that any given phenomenon for which we currently don't have a thorough explanation – human consciousness, for instance, or the origin of the Universe – will be best explained by the supernatural?

Given this pattern, it's clear that the chances of this are essentially zero. So close to zero that they might as well be

zero. And the hypothesis of the supernatural is therefore a hypothesis we can discard. It is a hypothesis we came up with when we didn't understand the world as well as we do now ... but that, on more careful examination, has never once been shown to be correct.

If I see any solid evidence to support God, or any supernatural explanation of any phenomenon, I'll reconsider my disbelief. Until then, I'll assume that the mind-bogglingly consistent pattern of natural explanations replacing supernatural ones is almost certain to continue.

(Oh – for the sake of brevity, I'm generally going to say "God" ... when I mean "God, or the soul, or metaphysical energy, or any sort of supernatural being or substance". I don't feel like getting into discussions about, "Well, I don't believe in an old man in the clouds with a white beard, but I believe ...". It's not just the man in the white beard that I don't believe in. I don't believe in any sort of religion, any sort of soul or spirit or metaphysical guiding force, anything that isn't the physical world and its vast and astonishing manifestations.

### **2: The inconsistency of world religions.**

If God (or any other metaphysical being or beings) were real, and people were really perceiving him/ her/ it/ them, why do these perceptions differ so wildly?

When different people look at, say, a tree, we more or less agree about what we're looking at: what size it is, what shape, whether it currently has leaves or not and what color those leaves are, etc. We may have disagreements regarding the tree – what other plants it's most closely related to, where it stands in the evolutionary scheme, should it be cut down to make way for a new sports stadium, etc. But unless one of us is hallucinating or deranged or literally unable to see, we can all agree on the tree's basic existence, and the basic facts about it.

This is blatantly not the case for God. Even among people who do believe in God, there is no agreement about what God is, what God does, what God wants from us, how he acts or doesn't act on the world, whether he's a he, whether there's one or more of him, whether he's a personal being or a diffuse metaphysical substance. And this is among smart, thoughtful people. What's more, many smart, thoughtful people don't even think God exists.

And if God existed, he'd be a whole lot bigger, a whole lot more powerful, with a whole lot more effect in the world, than a tree. Why is it that we can all see a tree in more or less the same way, but we don't see God in even remotely the same way?

The explanation, of course, is that God does not exist. We disagree so radically over what he is because we aren't perceiving anything that's real. We're "perceiving" something we made up; something we were taught to believe; something that the part of our brain that's wired to see pattern and intention, even when none exists, is inclined to see and believe.

(Editor: Ms. Christina's eight more Top Reasons will be seen in these pages in subsequent issues. – JR)

## “... WHILE THE WORST ARE FULL OF PASSIONATE INTENSITY” — Yeats

Sarah Sloat

(From “Opponents of GMOs Know a Lot Less About Them Than They Think They Do”, on *inverse.com*, 1/15/2019)

As anyone who has ever argued can attest, it’s nearly impossible to change a person’s mind when they are convinced they are right. This situation is even more challenging, scientists declare in a study released January 14 in *Nature Human Behavior*, when people whole-heartedly believe they understand a complex topic better than they actually do. And it’s exceptionally challenging when those people are talking about a scientific topic as complex as genetically modified organisms.

Genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, are living things like plants and animals whose genetic material has been artificially manipulated. Some crops, for example, are designed to be resistant to insect damage, while others have been engineered to be more nutritious. Approximately 90 percent of American scientists believe GMOs are safe to eat, yet only a third of consumers believe the same.

In the new study, scientists examined why people who distrust GMOs feel the way they do. Lead author and University of Colorado Boulder Assistant Professor Philip Fernbach, Ph.D., has had a long-standing interest in what he calls “the psychology of extreme beliefs” and how it connects to science denial. GMOs, he tells *Inverse*, emerged as the perfect subject to explore those ideas.

“It’s a really important technology but has very high levels of opposition, despite a scientific consensus around safety,” Fernbach explains. He and his colleagues surveyed more than 2,000 U.S. and European adults on their opinions about genetically modified foods. They were also asked how well they thought they understood the science behind GMOs and were tested on their general scientific literacy – basic science questions, like whether or not an electron is smaller than an atom.

The vast majority of study respondents, a total of 90 percent, reported that they had at least some distrust of GMOs. But when the study team pursued [that], they discovered that the more strongly a person reported they were opposed to GMOs, the more knowledgeable they thought they were on the topic. Furthermore, the individuals who were the most convinced they knew their stuff scored the lowest on both the GMO and general science tests. ...

With GMOs, politics doesn’t come as much into play in one’s opinion of the concept – which makes these results more in line with previous research on the psychology of extremism. Extreme views, Fernbach says, often stem from people feeling like they understand complex topics better than they actually do. This, he concedes, makes it trickier to change extreme beliefs.

“The extremists already think they understand the issue, so you might first have to get them to appreciate that their knowledge is shallow or incorrect.”

*Comment: Uh-huh, good luck with that. – JR*

## THE NRA’S VISION OF THE AMERICAN SCHOOLS OF TOMORROW

(Excerpted from “Brutalism: Can school design help prevent school shootings?” in *The Economist*, 1/28/2018)

Recent mass-murders have given rise to a new architectural school. In the days after the Santa Fe high school massacre Dan Patrick, the Republican lieutenant-governor of Texas, made two suggestions. One was to echo President Donald Trump’s call to arm teachers with concealed weapons (many teachers abhor the idea of being armed). The other way he suggested to make schools safer was by reducing the number of entrances to one or two (how children might flee such a place was not apparently a major consideration).

Mr. Patrick’s proposal might sound bananas, but some new schools are in fact designed with the prevention of mass shootings in mind. The average American school is 44 years old, built long before school shootings were a concern. Jim French, an architect with DLR Group who specializes in building schools, says his trade can help, but only up to a point. “The worst thing we can do is to turn our schools into prisons,” he says. (DLR also designs prisons.)

The recently redesigned school in Sandy Hook, site of the deadliest school shooting to date, has a new, light-filled building shaped like an “E” to maximize the number of evacuation routes. It has three entrances that can be reached from parking areas by foot bridges, allowing staff to monitor comings and goings. The school’s ground floor is elevated, making it difficult to see inside classrooms from the outside. Each classroom has locks and security doors as well as windows with impact-resistant glass. ...

The National Rifle Association (NRA) produced a 225-page report in 2013, in the wake of the Sandy Hook shootings, which it dusted off after the 2018 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High. The NRA suggests limiting entry to a single point; building a prison-style fence (the report shows a photo of a deficient fence juxtaposed with one that would have made East German border guards proud); banning greenery outside schools because intruders may hide in trees and bushes or use them to cut through the aforementioned fence; and making do without windows, or only small ones with ballistic protective glass. Front offices should be protected with two sets of automatically locking doors to create an “entrapment area”.

At the end of the report is a draft for a law to allow schools to arm their teachers. Sadly it lacks any estimate of the cost of “hardening” America’s more than 100,000 schools, but it would probably run into hundreds of millions of dollars for each state, at a time when schools in Detroit have leaking roofs and schools in Baltimore are unable to heat their classrooms in winter. According to estimates by the American Society of Civil Engineers, America’s school infrastructure is underfunded by about \$38 billion a year.

*Comment: All this to keep crazies with guns out of the schools. But how about addressing the real cause of the problem? How about ... wait, no, never mind, it was just a silly idea, forget I even mentioned it. I didn’t? Good, forget I even thought it. – JR*

**THE REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEVISED!  
ON THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW!**

*(Transcribed from "Christian TV Host Warns Rachel Maddow Will Lead Coup Against Trump", reported by Michael Ston on Right Wing Watch, on patheos.com, 7/18/2018)*



End Times broadcaster and radical conspiracy theorist Rick Wiles used his "TruNews" television program last night to warn that MSNBC's Rachel Maddow had signaled that a violent coup will take place "within the next 72 hours" during which President Trump and his family will be dragged out of the White House and beheaded.

Seriously.

On his program Wiles lamented the fact that "People like Maddow and CNN's Anderson Cooper on television is evidence that America has been 'homosexualized' and is 'no longer a Christian nation'."

Speaking on the TruNews network, Wiles, commenting on a recent Maddow segment in which the MSNBC host argued that the U.S. must prepare for "the worst case scenario that Trump is compromised by Russia", declared:

"America, you've been homosexualized. You've been Jewdy-ized. I'm just telling it how it is. She (Maddow) was spewing out, last night, calls for revolution. She was telling the left, 'Take a deep breath, we're at the moment, it's coming, we're almost there, we're going to remove him from the White House.' We're about 72 hours – possibly 72 hours – from a coup.

"Be prepared that you're going to turn on the television and see helicopters hovering over the roof of the White House with men clad in black rappelling down ropes, entering into the White House. Be prepared for a shoot out in the White House as Secret Service agents shoot commandos coming in to arrest President Trump.

"That is how close we are to a revolution. Be prepared for a mob – a leftist mob – to tear down the gates, the fence at the White House and to go into the White House and to drag him out with his family and decapitate them on the lawn of the White House."

*Comment: Rick, you say all this like it's a bad thing. – JR*

There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that "my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge". – Isaac Asimov

The best theology is probably no theology; just love one another. – Charles (Peanuts) Schulz

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Freethought Caucus!

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& Banquet Feb 8  
Darwin Day Celebration

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