

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April, 2010

We welcome sweet Springtime with a seasonal question: What do bunny rabbits and chocolate eggs have to do with death-and-resurrection? We question, too, the rationality of the Texas school board and, indeed, of our whole species. We vet Glenn Beck Christianity and Catholic-school sex education, champion separation, trash a classic proof of God's existence and, via an advance peek at this month's Book Club selection, refute God-based morality. Peek? Do so at pages 8-9 ... – JR

WHAT IS THE SECULAR COALITION FOR AMERICA?

(Excerpted from Atlanta Freethought News, March, 2010)

Ed: Last issue, we announced that the Council for Secular Humanism (with which SHSNY is affiliated) had – finally – joined the Secular Coalition for America (“It’s About Time,” PIQUE, March, 2010), without explaining what SCA is. Herewith, we correct the omission.

The Secular Coalition for America is a 501(c)4 advocacy organization whose purpose is to amplify the diverse and growing voice of the nontheistic community in the United States. It is located in Washington, D.C., for ready access to government, activist partners and the media. SCA staff lobbies U.S. Congress on issues of special concern to the nontheistic community.

Member organizations of the SCA are established 501(c)3 nonprofits that serve atheists, agnostics, humanists and free-thinkers. Member groups include:

- American Atheists
- American Ethical Union
- American Humanist Association
- Atheist Alliance International
- Camp Quest
- Council for Secular Humanism
- Institute for Humanist Studies
- Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers
- Secular Student Alliance
- Society for Humanistic Judaism

Their purpose in founding the coalition was to formalize a cooperative structure for visible, unified activism to improve the civic situation of citizens with a naturalistic worldview. The SCA also enthusiastically welcomes the participation of reli-

gious groups that share the view that freedom of conscience must extend to people of all faiths and of none. Accordingly, SCA staff works in cooperation with a variety of other organizations where common ground exists on specific issues.

SCA Makes History with Administration Briefing

On February 26, the SCA, along with a unified delegation of members of the secular movement from across the country, sat down with White House representatives* for an official policy briefing—the first of its kind for American nontheists. The event opened up new channels of dialogue between American nontheists and the Obama administration, serving as the latest indication that we are gaining significant momentum, and that secular Americans are a constituency that must be included in national policy decisions.

Since the meeting, rightwing groups have told the media that the SCA is a “hate-filled” coalition, but the truth is that the message could not have been more compassionate and constructive. SCA used this historic opportunity to raise issues such as protecting children from religiously-based medical neglect, ending military proselytizing, and curtailing religious discrimination.

SCA plans to expand its base of issues, increase its lobbying efforts, and generate new and innovative ways for secular Americans to connect, network, and get active throughout America. As Sean Faircloth said in his closing remarks to the administration:

“It is not our disbelief that brings us before you today. Rather it is our deep belief in the light of reason – and our confidence that the light of reason and justice will lead us all to a better and more compassionate world.”

**But not with the President. When will that happen? — JR*

BOARD OF DIRECTORS: John Rafferty, *President/Editor*; Elaine Lynn, *Vice President/Secretary*; Donna Marxer, *Treasurer*; Remo Cosentino; Arthur Harris; Lee Loshak; Irv Millman; Robert A. Murtha, Jr.

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SHSNY is a member of the Alliance of Secular Humanist Societies.

THE TEXAS SCHOOL BOARD IS NOT CONSERVATIVE

John Rafferty

(Based on "Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change," by James C. McKinley Jr. in *The New York Times*, March 12, from which all italicized material below is excerpted.)

I'm a liberal, but I have nothing against conservative political philosophy or its adherents. Why wouldn't I be in favor of low taxes, a strong national defense and limited government interference in my life? My difference with conservatives is that I have other concerns, too, liberal concerns with which I'm sure most true conservatives would not agree – just as I am equally sure they would not agree with the fakery, mendacity and outright lies of the Texas school board.

"Conservative" is such a convenient label for the sloppy, simplistic media to apply to everyone to the political right of Barack Obama. "Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change," *The New York Times* headlined on March 12, in an article which is quoted extensively (in italics) herein. But the Texas school board is not conservative, it's reactionary. It's jingo, it's nativist, it's racist, and what it certainly is *not* is conservative. To wit:

AUSTIN, Tex. — After three days of turbulent meetings, the Texas Board of Education on Friday approved a social studies curriculum that will put a conservative stamp on history and economics textbooks stressing the superiority of American capitalism, questioning the Founding Fathers' commitment to a purely secular government and presenting Republican political philosophies in a more positive light. ...

Since January, Republicans on the board have passed more than 100 amendments to the 120-page curriculum standards affecting history, sociology and economics courses from elementary to high school.

The standards were proposed by a panel of teachers.

A panel of *teachers*? What the hell do they know? Who needs teachers to set standards for teaching when you can turn to the likes of ...

... Cynthia Dunbar, a lawyer from Richmond who is a strict constitutionalist and thinks the nation was founded on Christian beliefs, [and who] managed to cut Thomas Jefferson from a list of figures whose writings inspired revolutions in the late 18th century and 19th century, replacing him with St. Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and William Blackstone.

In fact ...

There were no historians, sociologists or economists consulted at the meetings, though some members of the conservative bloc held themselves out as experts on certain topics. ...

And in a state that's 36.5% "Hispanic or Latino" ...

Efforts by Hispanic board members to include more Latino figures as role models for the state's large Hispanic population were consistently defeated,

prompting one member, Mary Helen Berlanga, to storm out of a meeting late Thursday night, saying, "They can just pretend this is a white America and Hispanics don't exist. They are going overboard, they are not experts, they are not historians," she said. "They are rewriting history, not only of Texas but of the United States and the world."

Well, yes, Ms. Berlanga, that's the idea. If you don't like reality as it's described by expert historians, sociologists and economists, and you have the votes, just rewrite it.

"We are adding balance," said Dr. Don McLeroy, the leader of the conservative faction on the board, after the vote. "History has already been skewed. Academia is skewed too far to the left."

Ah, yes, the infamous "liberal agenda," balanced by ...

... a plank to ensure that students learn about "the conservative resurgence of the 1980s and 1990s, including Phyllis Schlafly, the Contract With America, the Heritage Foundation, the Moral Majority and the National Rifle Association."

Seriously? The National Rifle Association? What exactly did the NRA do for America in the 1980s and 1990s, besides excusing with doubletalk the near-assassination of President Reagan by a crazed kid with a handgun? Why should Texas high school students be required to "study" the violent rants of the Black Panther movement in tandem with the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr.? How is history served by telling kids that Republicans supported civil rights legislation in Congress when so many only voted Yea after Democratic majorities had won passage? And yes, the "Venona papers" proved there had been Soviet infiltration of the U.S. government, but in what way does that excuse Joe McCarthy's witchhunts and character assassinations?

It's all "crapola," as conservative Archie Bunker used to say, and it's all in the new Texas guidelines for the teaching of social studies – and there's not a damn thing "conservative" about it, so let's stop calling it that.

Finally, one last jaw-dropping quote, from board member and constitutional scholar David Bradley, who "works in real estate" and who announced ...

"I reject the notion by the left of a constitutional separation of church and state. I have \$1,000 for the charity of your choice if you can find it in the Constitution."

Check the first ten words of the First Amendment, Dave: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" Speaking of checks, two F's in "Rafferty," and mail it to the SHSNY P.O. box.

God made the idiot for practice. Then he made the school board. – *Mark Twain*

Nothing doth more hurt in a state than that cunning men pass for wise. – *Francis Bacon*

THE DOOR TO FREEDOM IS IN THE WALL OF SEPARATION

Martine Reed

The Sunday *New York Times Magazine* of February 14 included an article entitled “How Christian were the Founders?” which examined the procedures of the highly conservative Texas Board of Education and its push to re-write the state’s history textbooks. The basic premise behind that effort is that the United States was founded by Christians, for Christians, to establish Christian rules and to enforce Christian morality.

A few days later, I attended a panel discussion sponsored both by the ACLU and a Unitarian Universalist church on Long Island, where I live. The panel included two “Reverends,” one the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the other the leader of the Interfaith Alliance – both defenders of church-state separation.

Although I was aware that the Religious Right (which is neither, by the way) is rising in popularity in many parts of the country, the extent of the intellectual and spiritual damage it seeks to inflict on us all had not fully struck me beforehand. The panel discussion especially was an eye-opener for someone like me who lives in New York, watches little TV, spends weekends in Massachusetts and often vacations in France. I have been away from the “real world,” and re-entry is painful.

This real world (not just the Midwest and South) is where, when you move to a new place, the first thing neighbors ask you is what church you attend; where, if you protest compulsory Christian prayer in the public schools, your car may be trashed; where people who have never read the U. S. Constitution will tell you that it is a God-inspired document.

Ask a person in this real world, as I did recently, “How many times does the Constitution mention God?” The answers I got were mostly “I don’t know ... several times ... three or four?” The correct answer is: *None*. The G-word does not appear, not even once.

Serious historians know that the history re-defined by the Texas Board is mendacious. To begin with, the expression “founding fathers” is generally misused by the right-wing extremists to include the Puritans of Plymouth Plantation – who did not found the United States of America. The U.S. came about some 150 years later, after a revolution and a “new order” based on the secular and rational values of the Enlightenment.

There is a whole body of evidence that the Founding Fathers, those involved in the events of the second half of the eighteenth century, were not establishing a Christian nation. The 1797 Treaty of Tripoli, for instance, written by Jefferson’s State Department in the Washington administration, and approved by a unanimous vote of the Senate and signed by John Adams, states that “... the government of the United states is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.”

From the beginning, America was a very diverse country.

The wisdom of the Constitution – and especially of the First Amendment – protects that diversity of thought and belief by not letting the government interfere in the legitimate practice of religion. Religious liberty – which includes the right to have no religion at all – is the bedrock of our democracy.

When an influential body such as the Texas Board of Education is successful in distorting history to fit it into an extreme-right agenda, one cannot help but wonder why they are not stopped; why they are so admired and followed at the grassroots level?

I wish to express my admiration and gratitude for these men and women of religion who are leading the fight to protect the separation of Church and State. They are working to preserve freedom of conscience for all of us – including me, an agnostic.

WHY “EVERYTHING HAS A CAUSE” IS NO JUSTIFICATION FOR GOD’S EXISTENCE

Greta Christina

(Posted on AlterNet 2/27/10)

Why on earth would we assume that any currently unanswered question about physical existence would eventually be answered: “Caused by God?”

“If there’s no God, then where did all this come from?”

I’ve written a fair amount about some of the more painfully bad arguments for religion and against atheism. ... And I’ve written about the ways that, when asked what evidence they have for their religious beliefs, many believers simply deflect the question. Instead of saying, “This is why I believe what I do,” they offer a list of excuses for why they don’t have to show us any stinking evidence.

But that’s not true for all believers. When asked why they believe what they do, some believers take the question seriously and sincerely — and they try to answer it.

I want to return the favor. I want to look at some of these more earnest answers to the question, “Why do you believe in God?” I want to take them seriously, and assume the people presenting them mean them sincerely.

And I want to point out, in as much detail as I can, that they still don’t hold water. They’re less bad than a lot of arguments for God – at least these people are trying to actually answer the question about the evidence for God, instead of treating the question as stupid or meaningless or patently offensive. But in my years as an atheist writer, not one of them has made me stop and think, “Hm, that’s a poser.”

Today’s argument is *But All of This Had to Come From Somewhere*, otherwise known as the “First Cause” argument. “Things don’t just come out of nowhere,” the argument goes. “Everything that exists has a cause. Therefore, the entirety of physical existence itself had to have had a cause. Therefore, God exists.”

Yeah. See, there are some big problems with that argument. For starters: If everything has to have a cause, then what caused God? And if God can somehow have always existed or

come into being out of nothing, then why can't that be true of the universe?

I agree that the question "Where did the universe come from?" is baffling. To say that physical existence either has been there forever or somehow popped into being from non-being does seem to call into question our basic understanding of cause and effect. It's a legitimately tough question.

But the God hypothesis doesn't answer this question, it simply begs the question. It simply moves the question back a notch. It gives an answer to the question of where the universe came from ("God"), but then we have to ask the exact same set of questions about God. "Where did he come from, and if he just always existed, how is that possible?"

"Where did the universe come from" is a legitimately tough question, but "God" is a terrible answer. No, it's worse than that. It's no answer at all.

What's more, the "God did it" answer cuts off further inquiry into the question.

Many astronomers and astrophysicists think the question "Where did the universe come from?" might someday be answerable. In fact, many of them strongly suspect the answer may indeed call into question our basic understanding of cause and effect, in much the same way Einstein's theories called into question our basic understanding of matter and energy and space, and Galileo's theories called into question our basic understanding of the structure of the universe. (For instance: One idea that's being tossed around is that the beginning of the universe was the beginning, not only of matter and energy, but of space-time itself, and that it therefore makes no sense to talk about what happened "before" time itself began.) They think "Where did physical existence come from?" may be an answerable question, and they're busy researching possible answers.

The "God did it" answer doesn't do this. ... It's like a parent answering every question with, "Because I say so." It's what atheists call the "God of the gaps": it takes any question about the physical world that's currently unanswered by science, and says, "Oh, we don't know the answer to that, therefore it must be God." It's like taking every empty space in the coloring book and reflexively filling it in with a blue crayon.

There have been countless times throughout history when we thought that Phenomenon (X) had a supernatural cause. Must have had a supernatural cause. Could not possibly have been caused by anything other than the supernatural. Why the sun rises and sets; why people get sick; what causes the weather and the seasons; why children look like their parents; how the complex variety of life came into being, etc. We didn't have a clue what caused it ... so we assumed it was God. (Or spirits, or demons, or whatever.)

And every single time that we eventually got a conclusive answer to the cause of Phenomenon (X), that answer has been entirely natural.

So why on earth would we assume that any currently unanswered question about physical existence – even a massive and baffling question like how it all came to exist in the

first place – would eventually turn out to be caused by God? It's never been the right answer before. Not even once. Why would we assume it's the right answer this time?

Finally, and most importantly: There is not a single scrap of evidence that the God hypothesis is true. There is not a single scrap of evidence suggesting that the universe had a supernatural cause, or that there are any supernatural beings or forces affecting it in any way.

As my wife Ingrid likes to point out: The universe does not look like one in which an independent outside agent is intervening. The universe does not look like one in which miracles happen and physical laws are violated by someone who's above these laws. The universe looks remarkably like a system of physical cause and effect, an unimaginably massive, intensely complex system of physical cause and effect, but physical cause and effect nonetheless. And every single attempt to demonstrate the existence of any supernatural force or entity affecting the universe – at least every attempt using careful, rigorous, double-blinded, placebo-controlled, etc., scientific methods – has fallen flat on its face.

When it comes to the question of how the universe came into being, the only reason for thinking that "God" is the answer to this question is the assumption that "God" *has* to be the answer to this question – the assumption that no other answer to this question is possible. And again, throughout history, whenever this assumption has been made in the past, it's been shown to be bullpucky. Countless phenomena once considered not only to have a supernatural cause, but to have no possible cause other than a supernatural one, have been shown to be entirely explainable by natural forces.

We have no reason to think the universe's existence is any different.

If you have evidence showing that the universe was caused by a supernatural creator, I'd be interested in hearing it. But if your only reason for believing in a God who created the universe is, "There had to be a creator because, well, because there just has to be, because everything has to have been caused by something, because I can't imagine a universe without something making it happen" ... you're going to have to find a better argument.

MORALITY AND THE ARGUMENT FROM THE VIEW FROM NOWHERE

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

(Excerpted from 36 Arguments for the Existence of God, A Work of Fiction, the SHSNY Book Club April selection)

Ed: Cass Seltzer, "the atheist with a soul," is in debate before a throng at Harvard with a theist, Fidley, who asks him ...

"What motivation for adopting the moral point of view can you possibly offer without a belief in God and immortality?"

Professor Fidley worries that, without a belief in God, people will act only for reasons of self-interest instead of behaving morally. But then what does he offer as the

only persuasion to adopt the moral point of view? Concern for one's self, in this life and the next. Without this, he says, there's no reason to act morally. In the end, it's Professor Fidley who reduces morality to self-interest.

And it's no wonder that in the end he has to fall back on self-interest as the ultimate motivation for morality. He can't see what can be morally compelling about morality, in and of itself. If he did see that, he wouldn't think that he needs God to magically inject the morality into morality. And since, according to him, there's nothing compelling about morality in itself, he also thinks morality requires some lash to punish us in an afterlife if we don't comply. So, in the end, all that he can appeal to are motivations of self-interest. In the end, all that he can offer people as a reason to act morally is for them to act in their self-interest, currying favor with an authority that can dole out rewards and mete out punishments.

But if the moral point of view is something that we humans can, with a great deal of effort, reason our way into, then morality itself provides the motivation to be moral. The reason to do the moral thing is that it's the moral thing to do; to do anything else is to make a shambles of our thinking, of our values, of our mattering. Our seeing *for ourselves* why it's the moral thing to do is what compels us.

When we're trying to teach a child why it's wrong to pick on another child, do we say, "It's wrong because if I catch you doing it again you'll be spanked," or do we, rather, say, "How would you feel if someone did that to you?" And when we're wrestling with our own conscience, trying to resist a temptation we know is wrong, do we think to ourselves, "If I do it, then I'll be flambéed in hell's fires," or do we think, "Would I want everyone in the world to behave this way? Wouldn't I feel moral outrage if I learned of someone else doing this?"

There is a point of view that is available to all of us. The philosopher Thomas Nagel called it the "View from Nowhere." It's the source of so much of our philosophical reasoning, including our moral reasoning. When you view the fact that you happened to be the particular person that you are from the vantage point of the View from Nowhere, that fact shrivels into insignificance. Of course, we don't lead our lives from the perspective of the View from Nowhere. We live inside our lives, where it's impossible not to feel one's self to matter. But, still, that View from Nowhere is always available to us, reminding us that there's nothing inherently special or uniquely deserving about any of us, that it's just an accident that one happens to be who one happens to be. And the consequence of these reflections is this: if we can't live coherently without believing ourselves to matter, then we can't live coherently without extending that same mattering to everyone else.

The work of ethics is the work of getting one's self to this vantage point and keeping it relevant to how one sees the world and acts. There are truths to discover in that process, and they're the truths that make us change our behavior. To assert that there has been no cumulative progress in discovering moral truths is as grossly false as to say there's been no cumu-

lative progress made in science. We've discovered that slavery is wrong, we've discovered that burning heretics in autos-da-fé is wrong, we've discovered that depriving people of rights on the basis of race or religion is wrong, we've discovered that the legal ownership of women is wrong.

Religious impulses and emotions are varied. There are expansive, life-affirming emotions that can find a natural expression in the context of religion, which is why I can never offer a wholesale condemnation of religion, even though Professor Fidley seems to think I do. But when religion encourages what I can only describe as a moral childishness that blocks the development of true moral thinking, then I do condemn it. When religion tells us that there is nothing more we can say about morality than that we can't see the reasons for it, but do it if you know what's good for you, then I do condemn it. We can do better than that. We can become moral grown-ups. And if there were a God, surely he would approve.

15 ANSWERS TO CREATIONIST NONSENSE

John Rennie – Part 13

(The "15 Answers," from *ScientificAmerican.com* in 2002, have been appearing occasionally in PIQUE.)

13. Evolutionists cannot point to any transitional fossils—creatures half reptile and half bird, for instance.

Actually, paleontologists know of many detailed examples of fossils intermediate in form between various taxonomic groups. One of the most famous fossils of all time is *Archaeopteryx*, which combines feathers and skeletal structures peculiar to birds with features of dinosaurs. A flock's worth of other feathered fossil species, some more avian and some less, has also been found. A sequence of fossils spans the evolution of modern horses from the tiny *Eohippus*. Whales had four-legged ancestors that walked on land, and creatures known as *Ambulocetus* and *Rodhocetus* helped to make that transition. Fossil seashells trace the evolution of various mollusks through millions of years. Perhaps 20 or more hominids (not all of them our ancestors) fill the gap between Lucy the australopithecine and modern humans.

Creationists, though, dismiss these fossil studies. They argue that *Archaeopteryx* is not a missing link between reptiles and birds—it is just an extinct bird with reptilian features. They want evolutionists to produce a weird, chimeric monster that cannot be classified as belonging to any known group.

Even if a creationist does accept a fossil as transitional between two species, he or she may then insist on seeing other fossils intermediate between it and the first two. These frustrating requests can proceed ad infinitum and place an unreasonable burden on the always incomplete fossil record.

Nevertheless, evolutionists can cite further supportive evidence from molecular biology.

All organisms share most of the same genes, but as evolution predicts, the structures of these genes and their products diverge among species, in keeping with their evolutionary relationships.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB: APRIL - JUNE 2010

TUESDAY, APRIL 27, 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

**The SHSNY Book Club meets at
The Muhlenberg Branch Library
209 West 23 Street (at 7th Ave.)
to discuss**

36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD:

A Work of Fiction

by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

36 Arguments for the Existence of God plunges into the great debate of our day: the clash between faith and reason — complete with a nail-biting debate (“Resolved: God Exists”) and stand-alone appendix with the 36 arguments — and responses. Through fiction, award-winning novelist Goldstein shows that the tension between religion and doubt cannot be understood through rational argument alone. It also must take into account individuals caught in the raptures and torments of religious experience in all their variety.

From Austin Dacey’s review in *Free Inquiry*: “Her marvelous new novel, witty, wise, captivating and sumptuous ... is about many things — atheism, religion, mathematics, academia, the life of the mind, and the blessings and duties of genius. ... I won’t give away ... this expertly paced story line ... gripping intellectual suspense. I will simply urge atheists and believers alike to experience this wonderful book.”

John Rafferty will lead the Book Club discussion.

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

Every SHSNY Book Club is a Book Swap, too.
Bring the books gathering dust on your shelves and take your pick of other readers’ castaways.
The leftovers? Donated to the Library.

What book(s) would you like to read and discuss?

Anyone can suggest any book that would be of interest to our secular humanist readers, and everyone’s opinion is valued. Final choices are made by our Book Club Editor, Elaine Lynn, but please email your suggestions to editor@shsny.org



**Thursday, May 20
6:30-8:00 p.m.**

**at the Muhlenberg Library
*IN GODS WE TRUST:
The Evolutionary Landscape
of Religion*
Scott Atran**

“How, Atran asks, is it that religious beliefs and practices are manifest, anywhere there are people, past or present? How could evolution have favoured wasteful investment in preposterous beliefs? ... Quite a project.” — *Ian Hacking, London Review of Books.*

“*In Gods We Trust* is by far the best exploration so far of the evolutionary basis of religious behavior.” — *James Fox, Prof of Anthropology, Stanford University.*

“*In Gods We Trust* is a marvelous work on the evolution of religions.” — *Michael Shermer.*

**Thursday, June 17
6:30-8:00 p.m.**

**at the Muhlenberg Library
*GOOD WITHOUT GOD:
What a Billion Nonreligious
People Do Believe*
Greg M. Epstein**

The Humanist chaplain at Harvard, Epstein makes a bold claim for what nonbelievers — as many as a billion worldwide — do share and believe.

Beyond Hitchens, Dawkins and Harris, at a time when debates about faith, reason, morality, and spirituality rage more fiercely than even — leaving millions searching for something they can believe in — Epstein explains how humanism offers comfort and hope that affirms our ability to pursue ethical lives of personal fulfillment in which we can aspire together for the greater good of us all.

SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL - MAY 2010

MONDAY, APRIL 5, 7:00 p.m.

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**

THE INVENTION OF LYING

Ricky Gervais ("The Office") wrote and directed this 2009 comedy about an alternate reality in which everyone can only tell the truth —



has no concept of untruth. But one man (Ricky) learns how to lie, becomes rich and then, to comfort his dying mother, tells

her there's a Man in the Sky who will welcome her to eternal bliss. His tales are overheard, leading to The Invention of Religion.

SHSNY Movie Night is free, but Stone Creek's management expects a "one drink minimum" per person for the use of their back room. Check out the menu and prices at www.stonecreeknyc.com

Coming Attractions

May 3: "A Serious Man" — Joel & Ethan Coen's black comedy revisits the story of Job.

June 7: "Religulous," Bill Maher's funny take on the three big religions.

SUNDAY, APRIL 18, 12:30

OUR MONTHLY SHSNY BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER

We'll gather again at Wild Ginger restaurant ("Asian fusion at its best"), 226 East 51 Street, between 2nd and 3rd Avenues.

Everyone interested in getting together with 20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good pan-Asian food and lively talk is welcome. Bring friends!

May brunch: 5/23

Save the date!

SHSNY'S DAY OF REASON CELEBRATION BRUNCH/ LECTURE/DISCUSSION SUNDAY, MAY 2, 12 Noon

at historic

PETE'S TAVERN

with guest speaker

JASON TORPY

President, Military Assoc. of Atheists & Freethinkers, on RELIGION & THE MILITARY

Proclaim and celebrate reason (rather than prayer) with 49 other rationalists at historic Pete's Tavern (129 East 18 St., at Irving Place), enjoy a sumptuous (and reasonable) brunch, and get involved with a fascinating talk.

West Point graduate Jason Torpy, who also sits on the boards of the Secular Coalition of America and the American Humanist Association, will discuss bias against nontheists and aggressive (and unconstitutional) Christian proselytizing in the military. The Q&A will focus on what *we* can do.

Brunch is \$20, for your choice of 11 entrees, one drink (Bloody Mary, Mimosa, etc.), coffee or tea, including all taxes and tips — cash or check only at the door, please.

Reservations are a must!

The room only holds 50 people. Phone 212-308-2165 (leave a call-back number), or email editor@shsny.org. *Please do it today!*

Save the date!

GALA BOOK-SIGNING PARTY WEDNESDAY, MAY 19, 6:30-10:00 p.m., to welcome Massimo Pigliucci's NONSENSE ON STILTS:

How to tell Science from Bunk

Join Massimo for conversation and complimentary Italian finger food at *Cellar 58*, a charming Italian wine

bar/restaurant (cash bar) at 58 Second Ave. (3rd-4th Sts. — see it at cellar58.com). Yes, you can buy a book, and have it autographed, too.

OTHER EVENTS

Sundays:

Religion on the Line

6-9:00 a.m. — WMCA, 770 AM

Equal Time for Freethought

6:30 p.m. — WBAI-NY 99.5FM

Religion & Ethics Newsweekly

6:30 p.m. — Channel 13

Wednesdays:

Atheism History Week - 5:30 p.m.

Hosted by SHSNY President John Rafferty. On MNN Channel 57 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming at www.mnn.org

Thursdays:

NYCity Atheists TV - 7:00 p.m.

Atheist Book Club - 7:30 p.m.,

hosted by SHSNY VP Elaine Lynn. Both on MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming at www.mnn.org

Fridays:

Drinking With Atheists — Meet with like-minded friends for a fun evening of conversation at a venue to be announced. Details at:

www.meetup.com/RichiesList/

Various Dates & Times:

Agnostic A.A. — Seven weekly A.A.-endorsed meetings at various times/places around the city. No prayers, emphasis on free expression, not a "higher power" or 12 steps. Schedules: agnosticAA NYC.org/meetings.html

STUFF HAPPENS!

SCHEDULES CHANGE! CHECK FOR UPDATES

.... on our website at www.shsny.org and/or 212-308-2165 and/or our MeetUp site at <http://humanism.meetup.com/155/>

PEEK

Newsletter of the Sexual Humorist Society of New York

April 1, 2010

In keeping with an ancient tradition that stretches all the way back to 2007, on this date we put aside weightier considerations (church/state, war/peace, mayo/Miracle Whip) to bring you tidings of Nobels lost, Dumbths won, churches cancelled and prayers both answered and recalled. – JR

**ICH GEWONNEN HABE!
ICH GEWONNEN HABE!**

VATICAN CITY, February 4 – A triumphant Pope Benedict XVI exulted “I won! I won!” in his native German when brought the news that he was the recipient of the 2009 SHSNY Dumbth Award.

The Pope, born Joseph Ratzinger, was informed of his election by the members and friends of the Secular Humanist Society of New York at that organization’s annual Darwin Day and Anniversary celebration the night before. His Holiness won the award for his idiotic opinion that the distribution of condoms would make the problem of AIDS in Africa worse.

News of the honor was brought to him by an aide during a papal audience with several dozen Irish priests who were attending a Vatican conference on early childhood education. After exulting “I won,” the Pope was seen to say a silent prayer and to whisper “*Ich bin der dumbthlichste*” (“I am the dumbthest”) to several of the Irish clergymen, whom he embraced, an act which seemed to startle, perhaps even upset at least a few of the priests.

“Some of us,” one confided to reporters later, “are a little uneasy about being fondled by an adult.”

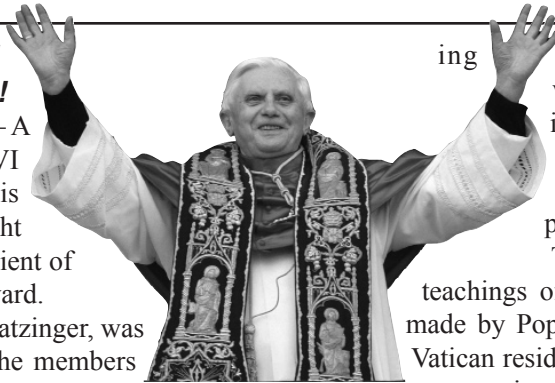
Later, at an official press conference, Vatican spokesman Guido Sarducci said that the Pope treasured the award. “His Holiness wishes to thank every member and friend of the Secular Humanist Society of New York who voted for him, and to assure the Society that he will keep the horse’s-ass statuette in a place of honor among his personal mementos in his living quarters,” Msgr. Sarducci said. “Right on his nightstand next to photos of his family and his Hitler Youth merit badges.”

Late-Breaking News

POPE REVERSES BAN ON ABORTION

(Based on theonion.com, 4/6/09)

VATICAN, April 1 – A sweating, visibly upset Pope Benedict XVI shocked a throng in St. Peter’s Square this morning by overturning the Catholic Church’s ban on abortion, announc-



ing that the termination of unwanted pregnancies was now “completely and perfectly acceptable in the eyes of God.”

Following a wild night on the town celebrating his SHSNY Dumbth Award, the Pope proclaimed that “not every life is sacred.”

The divine proclamation, which contradicts prior teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, was reportedly made by Pope Benedict after a late night phone call to his Vatican residence. According to witnesses, His Holiness was seen pacing, wringing his hands, and cursing at himself in a hallway mirror before coming to the sudden decision.

“My friends in Christ, brothers and sisters of the cloth, having an abortion is ... um ... not that big a deal,” announced the anxious pontiff while reading from a series of hastily scrawled edicts. “In fact, it is written, uh, somewhere, that the taking of an innocent life might even be something of a blessing in some cases. For example, when a mother’s life is at risk,” continued Benedict, wiping several beads of sweat from his forehead. “Or, say, when someone is just way too old to become a father at this point.”

Shocking a crowd of thousands that had gathered in St. Peter’s Square, the infallible religious leader declared Sunday that the killing of an unborn child is “not really a mortal sin,” especially if everyone involved pretty much wished the whole thing had never happened.

Other important factors outlined by Benedict included length of pregnancy and whether or not two people just met one crazy night, got a little carried away, and made the biggest mistake of both their lives.

“All women, particularly those by the name of Sheila, deserve the right to choose,” Benedict said. “And if they choose wrongly—if they choose to keep the child, even though that does not make any sense, and might very well ruin someone’s career—then maybe they should just leave the country and never come back.”

“The Lord hath come unto me when I could not sleep and He hath said, ‘This is totally an option now,’” proclaimed Benedict, taking off his miter to fan himself. “Also, He hath said that some people should probably go out and get this done,

like, today, and that they shouldn't tell anyone else about it. Um ... Amen."

3.4 TRILLION PRAYERS RECALLED IN "QUALITY CONTROL" EFFORT

CANTERBURY, UK, April 1 – Prelates representing the world's leading Protestant denominations convened at this historic seat of the Anglican Church yesterday to announce "a quality-control recall" of an almost countless number of prayers that have gone unanswered by the Deity for centuries. "By our best estimates," Dr. Rowen Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, explained, "more than 3.4 trillion prayers have been offered up to Heaven by believers since the Church of England formalized worship in 1549. And the number of recorded positive answers by God is – there's no other way to put this – dismally small. Now, since God is by definition merciful and bountiful and so should be answering our prayers, obviously we're doing something wrong."

Exactly how the prayers of believers long dead will be "recalled," has not been worked out, church leaders admitted. More important, they said, were "21st century approaches" to divine intervention in human affairs. "We've learned a lot from Toyota," one prelate said privately, "and the best thing we can do is to get out in front of this problem, admit the shortfall, stop making excuses for God – God forgive me – and program some new metrics for prayer in today's universe. We have to learn to beseech in entirely new ways."

Another leader suggested several innovations. "Maybe we should pray standing up and wear hats, like the Jews," he said, "or go back to animal sacrifice." When pressed on the question of actually sacrificing animals, or even humans, he explained, "Everything and anything is on the table; we're open to every workable idea."

Meanwhile, in Rome, the Catholic Church stood firmly by its millennium-long traditions. Vatican spokesman Msgr. Guido Sarducci told reporters today, "According to our calculations, about one in every 1,736 prayers by Catholics are answered, at least in part – you know, finding a ten-dollar bill when your mortgage is due – so we're going to stick with what's been working, sort of, for 2,000 years."

SOME PRAYERS ARE FINALLY ANSWERED

(From The Onion, 10/18/07, forwarded by Chic Schissel)

HEAVEN, April 1— Explaining that He had been "absolutely swamped," God announced yesterday that He was finally able to find time in His busy schedule to answer a portion of the 1995 and 1996 prayer backlog.

"Unfortunately, I don't really want a red wagon anymore," 18-year-old Morgantown, WV resident Zach Gilpin said. Others expressed similar displeasure, including 30-year-old accountant Jack Demont, who said that former classmate and high school cheerleader Heidi Stillman's repeated phone calls to his house are "destroying" his marriage.

God was unavailable for further comment.

SOUTH DAKOTA LEGISLATURE ENACTS "ONE FOOT" ABORTION LAW

PIERRE, SD, April 1 – By an overwhelming 34-3 vote today, the South Dakota State Senate passed a controversial "One Foot" abortion-restricting law. Beginning June 1, women seeking an abortion in South Dakota – along with their doctors – will be required to stand on one foot for 45 minutes while watching a gory video of a late-term abortion as Paul Anka's "She's Having My Baby," plays over and over and over on the soundtrack.

State Senator Henry (Hank) Griswold told reporters, "Unlike the I-don't-know-how-many other laws we passed before this that some pointy-headed activist judges have called unconstitutional, this one is absolutely legal because it no way limits a woman's access to child-murder services. It simply requires the slut and her hired assassin to take a break for less than an hour from sipping Margheritas, smoking pot, listening to heavy metal and God knows what in order to view the consequences of their despicable actions while remaining fully alert. If either of them puts the other foot down on the floor, they both have to start over."

Despite the overwhelming vote for the "One Foot" measure, South Dakota pro-choice activists claimed two small victories: the defeat of a planned amendment that would have required a woman seeking an abortion to obtain the fetus's written consent to the procedure, and of another that would have mandated the erasure of the word "fetus" in all government documents and offices, schools and hospitals, and its replacement by the term "unborn innocent child of God."

SUPREME COURT GIVES GORE'S NOBEL PRIZE TO BUSH

(Based on a 2007 Borowitz Report by Andy Borowitz)

WASHINGTON, D.C., April 1 – Three years after former Vice President Al Gore received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts on global warming, the U.S. Supreme Court handed Mr. Gore a stunning reversal, stripping him of his Nobel and awarding it to ex-President George W. Bush instead.

In a 5-4 decision that reminded many observers of the 2000 Bush v. Gore decision awarding the presidency to Mr. Bush, the majority justices made it clear that they had taken the unprecedented step of stripping Mr. Gore of his Nobel because, as with the presidency, Mr. Bush "deserved it more."

"And while it is true that Al Gore has talked a lot about global warming," wrote Justice Antonin Scalia for the majority, "President Bush actually helped create global warming."

CHURCH CANCELLED DUE TO LACK OF GOD

(Based on an Onion Radio News bulletin: 12/03/09)

Pastor Tim Leopold of The Church of Holy Christ in Heaven cancelled services Sunday because God simply doesn't exist.

Church services have been replaced by a Sunday morning meeting called The Church of Imaginary Make-Believe Land.

IS HOMO SAPIENS THE REASONING ANIMAL?

Alexander Nussbaum

Short answer: No! As Mark Twain put it, “Man is the Reasoning Animal. Such is the claim. I think it is open to dispute. Indeed, my experiments have proven to me that he is the Unreasoning Animal.”

Reason has played a very limited role in human affairs, largely confined to recent times, to a tiny minority of cultures and a tiny percent of cognitive functioning even in people from those cultures.

Most humanists would agree that reason is an essential part of humanism. Freud maintained that reason was not a birthright; rather, the best we could do was to engage in a life-long struggle to maintain the slim thread of reason against the powers of the id, cruel reality and “the black mud of occultism,” i.e., religion. Jung, a forerunner of new ageism, believed that reason was the Western sickness, and that we should surrender to the glory of unreason as manifested by his adored Nazis.

Individuals from cultures that are preliterate have been shown to be unable to make logical inferences. For example non-literate Kpelle rice farmers in Liberia were presented the following question:

All Kpelle men are rice farmers.

Mr. Smith is not a rice farmer.

Is he a Kpelle man?

The farmers replied, “Since I do not know him in person I cannot answer that question.”

However, let us not make the grievous mistake of confusing ethnicity or race with culture. The cognitive potentials of all groups defined by ethnicity or the arbitrary labels of races are identical. Ethiopian Jews born into a medieval environment where electricity is unknown have become surgeons, scientists and army officers in a modern technological society.

But reason is not multicultural. Steven Schafersman, a geologist active in opposing creationism, has written, “Children are not born with the power to think critically, nor do they develop this ability naturally. Critical thinking is a learned ability that must be taught. Most individuals never learn it. Critical thinking can be described as the scientific method applied by ordinary people to the ordinary world. Critical thinking is the ability to think for one’s self.”

A biology professor named Craig Nelson, after decades of being confronted with rejection of evolution and other irrational thought, proposed a four-stage theory of critical thought, seeing it as a process that proceeds in an orderly way, with the lower stages needing to be passed before higher stages can be reached.

Nelson’s Four Stages of Critical Thinking

Stage 1: Knowledge as Truth

Ideas are seen as either right or wrong, and all answers are provided by an authority. Critical thinking at this stage does not exist. The goal of religions is to keep individuals at this level. Most of the world never progressed from this point, and

only in the West is the individual allowed the freedom to progress from this point. And even there, while it has become trendy for colleges to claim to emphasize “critical thinking,” in truth they are geared to churn out dogmatists.

Stage 2: Knowledge is what I choose to believe.

One sees that authorities do not have the answers, truth is not an absolute, and knowledge is filled with uncertainty. But one believes that if truth is not absolutely objective, then it must be just personal, intuitive and totally subjective. This may be accompanied by a distrust of authority, schools and science. Think conspiracy theorists and undergraduates rebelling against everything their parents represent.

Stage 3: Contextual Relativism

The individual realizes that truth is not merely an opinion, but believes that critical thinking is a game. Individuals at this stage understand the criteria used within a scientific field, but compartmentalize and see no need to “play the game” of critical thought in their own lives. Individuals at this stage can slyly give the boss or teacher or journal editor “what they want,” and remain totally irrational in their own beliefs.

Stage 4: Responsible Knowing

At this highest level individuals can compare the advantages and disadvantages of various theories. Skeptical of simple answers, they can look at a problem from different angles, see the tradeoffs and engage in true critical thinking while adhering to real values and contributing to the greater good.

Is the opportunity to reach the stage of true critical thought enough to ensure reaching, or remaining at, that level? Unfortunately, no. Those infected by a deadly virus do not become well by coming into contact with healthy people; indeed, they spread the virus to the previously healthy. Irrational cultures are hotbeds for mind viruses – bundles of memes, units of cultural transmission functioning like genes, units of biological transmission – that affect thought the way computer viruses affect computers and biological viruses affect health.

Is education a guarantor of reason? Not necessarily. Like physical health, reason is always in delicate balance and easily lost. An Islamic terrorist was recently convicted of attempted murder. At her trial she demanded that members of the jury be DNA-tested to make sure they weren’t Jews.

She’s an MIT-trained neuroscientist.

SEX EDUCATION IN A CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Mark Steel

(From The Independent, UK)

The Catholic teacher can demonstrate putting a condom on a banana, saying “First we expel the air, then place it over the end, then we remember that if you do this for real you’ll face an eternity in unimaginably agonizing pain, with molten lava searing through your pores as you scream in soulless anguish while demons submerge you in relentless unbearable horror, then right the way along, nice and snug and we’re done. Now you try.”

THE DEFINITION OF CRAZY

Ellen Friedrichs

(Excerpted from "Mississippi: More Abstinence Education Proposed for the State with the Highest Teen Pregnancy Rates," on alternet.org, 3/3/10)

Mississippi is the state with the highest teen pregnancy rate in the country. It has rates of chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis among youth practically twice the national average. Additionally, the Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. reports that:

"Nearly 60 percent of Mississippi high school students report ever having had sexual intercourse compared to 47.8 percent of high school students nationwide. Moreover, teens in the state are nearly twice as likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse before the age of 13, and 50 percent more likely to have had four or more sexual partners."

So what's a good legislator to do in this case? Why, propose a law requiring abstinence education, of course!

"House Bill 837 would mandate school boards adopt a sex education policy by June 30, 2011, of their choosing: abstinence-only or abstinence-plus. ... The bill passed the House 83-32 and awaits Senate action. Last year, a bill that would have required schools to teach more than abstinence failed."

Nice of them to allow schools to pick between abstinence and, well, abstinence.

It's also worth noting that Mississippi ... accepted close to six million in abstinence funds in 2008 alone.

I understand the reluctance to try something new, but more of a failed program for a state in crisis? Well, it's nothing short of lunacy.

IS THE "EASTER" WE KNOW A JOKE?

Kari Henley

(Excerpted from "What do a Rabbit, Colored Eggs and Candy Have to Do with Jesus – The History of Easter Revealed" on Huffingtonpost.com, 4/11/09)

Ever stopped to wonder how bunnies, eggs and scavenger hunts are related to Easter's religious celebration of Jesus dying on the cross and rising again? Strange bedfellows they are. I never had any idea as a kid. No one seemed to question the whole odd mix: why a rabbit would have a basket of eggs in the first place, and how that tied in to crucifixion and resurrection was another matter. Let's explore some Easter myths while popping a few chocolate Cadbury treats.

Before Moses was around to have the first Seder, or Jesus walked the Earth, we celebrated the rites of Spring at this time of year, with the perfect balance of light and darkness, called the Vernal Equinox. ...

It turns out the celebrations of modern Easter's egg-toting-rabbit evolves from a mythic German goddess named Ostara (Oestre/Eastre), the Germanic Goddess of Springtime. According to the Encyclopedica Mythica:

"In ancient Anglo-Saxon myth, Ostara is the personification of the rising sun. In that capacity she is associated with the spring and is considered to be a fertility goddess. She is the friend of all children and to amuse them she changed her pet bird into a rabbit. This rabbit brought forth brightly colored eggs, which the goddess gave to the children as gifts. From her name and rites the festival of Easter is derived."

All other European words for "Easter" derive from the Hebrew word *pasah*, to pass over, thus reflecting the Biblical connection with the Jewish Passover. I find it ironic that the holiest day in the Christian faith is named after a goddess.

According to www.godchecker.com, Ostara was very popular with the Anglo-Saxon people, who worshiped her under the name Eostre. Yet there is something odd about how little there is written about her; the myth only resides in one area, and is recorded to exist for a fairly short period of time. Most Sumerian, Greek and Egyptian figures like Isis, Kali, and Demeter were widely worshiped for thousands of years, and many of their stories had moral components or attributes to emulate. What's the moral element of the Easter bunny? Something about it just doesn't fit.

Was it all a joke?

Recent research suggests that the Ostara myth was possibly invented during a mischievous moment by the Venerable Bede. This well-known monk mentioned her in connection with the pagan festival Eosturmonath in a book written in 750 C.E., but extensive research has failed to find a trace of her prior to that.

Imagine: a famous monk makes up a weird story about a goddess who never existed who turns a bird into a rabbit that lays colored eggs; and it morphs into a mega-watt holiday celebrated the modern world over.

Wow. Bet that gets your Easter bonnet in a tizzy. Imagine the irony in making up a goddess myth, which becomes linked with the "greatest story ever told," and simultaneously serves as a cornucopia of commerce for Hershey's, hat makers and basket weavers.

JESUS AND MO CELEBRATE GOOD FRIDAY

(From Jesusandmo.net)

Mohammed (bearing cake with birthday-candle crucifix atop): Happy Cruciversary, Jesus!

Jesus: (in bed, under covers): Leave me alone.

Mo: Why don't you want to celebrate the day you died painfully and humiliatingly nailed to a lump of wood?

Jesus: Go figure.

Mo: Look, I made you a cake with one of those candles that lights again when you blow it out – it's *symbolic*.

Jesus: A cruciversary cake. Gee, thanks.

Mo: I used *self-rising* flour and a *recycled* paper plate. There's even some *human blood* in the sponge – although that was accidental.

Jesus (still under covers): I'm not getting up until Sunday.

GOD TEXTS THE 10 COMMANDMENTS TO MOSES

Jamie Quatro

(Forwarded by Ethel Romm)

M, pls rite on tabs & giv 2 ppl

1. no1 b4 me, srsly
2. dnt wrshp pix/idols
3. no omg's
4. no wrk w/end (sat 4 now; sun l8r)
5. rents ok – ur m&d r cool
6. dnt kill ppl
7. :-X only w/m8
8. dnt steal
9. dnt lie re: bf
10. dnt ogle bf's m8. or ox. Or dnky. Myob

ttyl, JHWH

ps. wwjd?

JESUS EXPLAINS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COMMANDMENTS TO THE BARMAID

(From *jesusandmo.net*)

Jesus: People today act like they're in some kind of morality supermarket. They choose from a list of do's-and-don'ts, picking what they like and ignoring what is inconvenient for them.

Mohammed: They lack a solid moral foundation.

Jesus: The Book of Exodus contains an eternal, immutable code which has provided all humanity with divine guidance for

3,000 years – the Ten Commandments.

Barmaid: I've often wondered why it is so important not to boil a kid in its mother's milk, as it says in Exodus 34:26. Can you explain that?

Jesus: Not *those* Ten Commandments, the *other* ones.

Mo: Ignore it. It's probably just some weird Jewish thing.

JESUS OF NAZARETH: COMMIE NAZI

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

– *Matthew 5:3-10*

I beg you, look for the words ‘social justice’ or ‘economic justice’ on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words ... Communists are on the left, and the Nazis are on the right. ... But they both subscribe to one philosophy, and they flew one banner ... On each banner, read the words, here in America: ‘social justice.’”

– *Glenn Beck*

PROMISES, PROMISES

Rush Limbaugh

(From his *March 9* talk show)

If all this [healthcare reform] passes, and five years from now all this is implemented, I'll leave the country.

I'll go to Costa Rica.

Ed: *Where every citizen enjoys government-run healthcare.*

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