

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February, 2010

It's Darwin Month on the calendar, in the movies, at our Anniversary Dinner February 3 (*still time to reserve - see page 7*), and right here. Herein we also consult two philosophers, take a philosophy quiz, explode some Lincoln myths, hunt for Satan in Brooklyn, and contemplate cannibalism in Flushing and all-American violence. But most prominently in these pages this month, eight of us argue minarets in Switzerland, immigrants in America, and (yet again) school boards in the Catskills. – JR

THE ORIGIN OF DARWIN

Olivia Judson

(Reprinted from the Op-Ed page of The New York Times, February 12, 2009.)

My fellow primates, 200 years ago today, Charles Darwin was born. Please join me in wishing him happy birthday! Unlike many members of the human species, Darwin makes an easy hero. His achievements were prodigious; his science, meticulous. His work transformed our understanding of the planet and of ourselves.

At the same time, he was a humane, gentle, decent man, a loving husband and father, and a loyal friend. Judging by his letters, he was also sometimes quite funny. He was, in other words, one of those rare beings, as likable as he was impressive.

For example, after his marriage, Darwin worked at home, and his children (of the 10 he fathered, seven survived to adulthood) remembered playing in his study. Later, one of his sons recounted how, after an argument, his father came up to his room, sat on his bed, and apologized for losing his temper. And although often painted as a recluse, Darwin served as a local magistrate, meting out justice in his dining room.

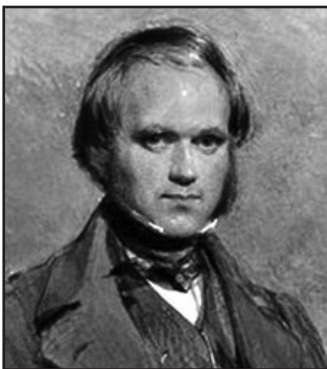
Moreover, while many of his contemporaries approved of slavery, Darwin did not. He came from a family of ardent abolitionists, and he was revolted by what he saw in slave countries: "Near Rio de Janeiro I lived opposite to an old lady, who kept screws to crush the fingers of her female slaves. I have stayed in a house

where a young household mulatto, daily and hourly, was reviled, beaten and persecuted enough to break the spirit of the lowest animal It makes one's blood boil, yet heart tremble, to think that we Englishmen and our American descendants, with their boastful cry of liberty, have been and are so guilty."

He practiced a kind of ideal, dream-like science. He examined the minutiae of nature – shells of barnacles, pistils of flowers – but worked on grand themes. He corresponded with lofty men of learning, but also with farmers and pigeon breeders. He observed, questioned, experimented, constantly testing his ideas.

Could plants from the mainland colonize a newly formed island? If so, they would need a way to get there. Could they survive in the ocean? To find out, he immersed seeds in salt water for weeks, then planted them to see how many could sprout. He reported, for example, that "an asparagus plant with ripe berries floated for 23 days, when dried it floated for 85 days, and the seeds afterwards germinated." The Atlantic current moved at 33 nautical miles a day; he figured that would take a seed more than 1,300 miles in 42 days. Yes, seeds could travel by sea.

He published important work on subjects as diverse as the biology of carnivorous plants, barnacles, earthworms and the formation of coral reefs. He wrote a travelogue, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, that was an immediate best seller and remains a classic of its kind. And as if that was not enough, he discovered two major forces in evo-



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lution — natural selection and sexual selection — and wrote three radical scientific masterpieces, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872).

The *Origin*, of course, is what he is best known for. This volume, colossal in scope yet minutely detailed, laid the foundations of modern biology. Here, Darwin presented extensive and compelling evidence that all living beings — including humans — have evolved from a common ancestor, and that natural selection is the chief force driving evolutionary change. Sexual selection, he argued, was an additional force, responsible for spectacular features like the tail feathers of peacocks that are useless for (or even detrimental to) survival but essential for seduction.

Before the *Origin*, similarities and differences between species were mere curiosities; questions as to why a certain plant is succulent like a cactus or deciduous like a maple could be answered only, “Because.” Biology itself was nothing more than a vast exercise in catalog and description. After the *Origin*, all organisms became connected, part of the same, profoundly ancient, family tree. Similarities and differences became comprehensible and explicable. In short, Darwin gave us a framework for asking questions about the natural world, and about ourselves.

He was not right about everything. How could he have been? Famously, he didn’t know how genetics works; as for DNA — well, the structure of the molecule wasn’t discovered until 1953. So today’s view of evolution is much more nuanced than his. We have incorporated genetics, and expanded and refined our understanding of natural selection, and of the other forces in evolution.

But what is astonishing is how much Darwin did know, and how far he saw. His imagination told him, for example, that many female animals have a sense of beauty — that they like to mate with the most beautiful males. For this he was ridiculed. But we know that he was right. Still more impressive: he was not afraid to apply his ideas to humans. He thought that natural selection had operated on us, just as it had on fruit flies and centipedes.

As we delve into DNA sequences, we can see natural selection acting at the level of genes. Our genes hold evidence of our intimate associations with other beings, from cows to malaria parasites and grains. The latest research allows us to trace the genetic changes that differentiate us from our primate cousins, and shows that large parts of the human genome bear the stamp of evolution by means of natural selection.

I think Darwin would have been pleased. But not surprised.

ONE OPPOSABLE THUMB UP FOR DARWIN, ONE PREHENSILE TAIL DOWN FOR BLUE PEOPLE A Review of “Creation” and of “Avatar”

John Rafferty

On January 11, along with nearly 300 other free-thinkers alerted by the member groups of Reasonable New York, I attended a free screening of “Creation,” a new major movie about Charles Darwin and the writing (the “creation”) of *The Origin of Species*.



Next morning, Irv Millman and I paid to see James Cameron’s latest mega-millions blockbuster, “Avatar.” (Strangely, neither wife was interested in a 3-hour space opera about 10-foot-tall blue aliens with tails.)

“Creation” will be in general release by the time this issue of PIQUE is in print, and the question is: do I recommend that you see it?

The short answer is Yes, with reservations. The film is beautifully produced, staged and acted — the Brits do period pieces as no one else can; we do blue people. It focuses on Darwin’s personal life: his agonizing grief over his beloved daughter’s death, and his estrangement from his believing-Christian wife over *Origin*. It’s a movie love story that ends in lovers’ reconciliation and book’s publication, but I would have appreciated a little more of the actual theory and of the public controversy (Huxley, exulting: “You have killed God!”). And having a platitudinous, self-righteous village vicar friend stand in for Darwin’s critics was, well, straw-man wussy.



Of course the Christian Right has been screaming about “Creation” for months. (Ironically, the producers had a hard time finding an American distributor, until they finally signed with the same group that distributed Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ.”) And I’m afraid that the film’s focus on Darwin’s tortured grief and depression will lead to choruses of, “See, the whole theory of evolution is the product of an unbalanced, even insane mind.”

Well, they’d probably say that anyway. Go see it.

As for “Avatar,” once I got used to the 3-D and the “real-life” aliens, I started to check my watch. If you’ve ever seen a Western, you’ve seen “Avatar.” But the Catholic Church is going nuts over the film’s world-soul pantheism. On Pandora, the people are one with the earth, their spirit lives in the planet’s giant trees, and they wind up whup-assing the WASPY, Christianity-looking, ecology-destroying, imperialist exploiters from Earth. (Oops, did I just ruin the suspense?)

In other words, the Na’vi of Pandora not only don’t find Jesus, they’d reject Him if offered — and they win?

THE OTHER BIRTHDAY BOY OF FEBRUARY 12, 1809

John Rafferty

"The Bible is not my book, nor Christianity my profession." -- Abraham Lincoln

The Christian revisionists who have been rewriting American history for as long as we've had any history went to work on Abraham Lincoln while the smell of gunsmoke still hung in the air of the Ford Theater.

They called the non-church-going 16th president "infidel," "apostate" and "atheist" while he was alive, but when he became the nation's first martyr they went to work to "improve" his biography.

One of his first biographers, for instance, a Dr. Josiah Holland, asked William Herndon about his law partner's religious convictions. Herndon replied that Lincoln had none. "Oh well," Holland said, "I'll fix that," and did, fabricating accounts of Lincoln's piety in a book he spent all of two weeks researching.



We don't know who, but somebody inserted the "under God" phrase into printed versions of the Gettysburg Address; it's not in either of the handwritten drafts Lincoln made on the day of the speech.

And that famous Matthew Brady photograph of Lincoln and his son Tad reading the Bible? They were actually looking at Brady's photo album.

So whom can we trust for the straight story on the religious views of our 16th president?

"In making up my mind as to what Mr. Lincoln really believed, I do not take into consideration the evidence of unnamed persons or the contents of anonymous letters; I take the testimony of those who knew and loved him, of those to whom he opened his heart and to whom he spoke in the freedom of perfect confidence." -- Robert Green Ingersoll

"Mr. Lincoln's maxim and philosophy were: 'What is to be, will be, and no prayers of ours can arrest the decree.' He never joined any Church. He was a religious man always, I think, but was not a technical Christian." -- Mary Todd Lincoln

"In religion, Mr. Lincoln was about of the same opinion as Bob Ingersoll, and there is no account of his ever having changed. He went to church a few times with his family while he was President, but so far as I have been able to find out, he remained an unbeliever. Mr. Lincoln in his younger days wrote a book, in which he endeavored to prove the fallacy of the plan of salvation and the divinity of Christ."

-- Judge James M. Nelson, personal friend

In an 1875 editorial, perhaps marking the 10th anniversary of his assassination, *The New York World* editorialized that any indications of piety by Lincoln were probably in support of the Civil War effort:

"While it may be fairly said that Mr. Lincoln entertained many Christian sentiments, it cannot be said that he was himself a Christian in faith or practice. He was no disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. He did not believe in his divinity and was not a member of his Church...."

"If the Churches had grown cold -- if the Christians had taken a stand aloof -- that instant the Union would have perished. Mr. Lincoln regulated his religious manifestations accordingly. He declared frequently that he would do anything to save the Union, and among the many things he did was the partial concealment of his individual religious opinions. Is this a blot upon his fame? Or shall we all agree that it was a conscientious and patriotic sacrifice."

Finally (at least in these pages), consider the content of a letter the grieving Lincoln is said to have written (its authenticity has not been absolutely proven) to Judge J. S. Wakefield after son Willie Lincoln's death in 1862:

"My earlier views of the unsoundness of the Christian scheme of salvation and the human origin of the scriptures, have become clearer and stronger with advancing years and I see no reason for thinking I shall ever change them."

Happy 201st Birthday, Abraham Lincoln: skeptic, free-thinker, and one of America's two greatest presidents.

ON THE SCOPE OF SKEPTICAL INQUIRY: SKEPTICISM, ATHEISM & POLITICAL THEORY Massimo Pigliucci

(Reprinted from rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com, 10/21/09)

There has been much discussion lately on this blog and elsewhere about the relationships among skepticism, atheism, and politics. I have roundly criticized Richard Dawkins for extending scientific skepticism into areas that are more properly the domain of philosophical analysis, as well as Penn and Teller and Michael Shermer for doing the same with politics to support their libertarian views. Of course, even a cursory reader of this blog will easily find my own pieces about religion and politics, which may make it seem like I'm a sinner throwing stones at my fellow skeptics.

In reality, this debate has been going on for decades, and it has at times involved some of the great figures of skepticism. Just think of Paul Kurtz's struggle to balance his own organizations, the Council for Secular Humanism and what is now known as the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, organizations that most certainly do not always

see eye to eye when it comes to mixing skepticism, religion and politics. Michael Shermer, on the other hand, has been criticized on his own multi-author blog for not making a distinction between scientifically defensible notions and political positions. And of course, Penn and Teller's absurd denial of global warming, and recent Dawkins award winner Bill Maher's insane criticism of "western medicine" complete this increasingly messy picture.

Before continuing, therefore, let me be clear about what it is I am trying to do. I am most definitely not seeking to tell people what to write about and what to stay away from. Not only would that be futile, but it is contrary to the spirit of open inquiry that I hold as one of my highest ideals. Besides, as I mentioned earlier, I can easily be seen as a repeat offender, and coherence is another ideal I hold pretty high (despite one of my favorite quotes by Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes").

What I am attempting is a serious discussion of the differences and commonalities among the three areas pertinent to the topics in question: (scientific, or evidence-based) skepticism, atheism, and political philosophy. Those are my interests and I am presumptuous enough to think that I have something relevant to say in those domains. But I am in fact continuously switching among three not automatically interchangeable hats: (former) scientist, (current) philosopher, and politically-minded intellectual. All of that said, let the game begin!

First, let me define what I mean by skeptical inquiry, atheism and political philosophy. Skeptical inquiry, in the classic sense, pertains to the critical examination of evidential claims of the para- or super-normal. This means not just ghosts, telepathy, clairvoyance, UFOs and the like, but also — for instance — the creationist idea that the world is 6,000 years old. All these claims are, at least in principle, amenable to scientific inquiry because they refer to things that we can observe, measure and perhaps even repeat experimentally. Notice, of course, that (some) religious claims do therefore fall squarely within the domain of scientific skepticism. Also in this area we find pseudohistorical claims, such as Holocaust denial, and pseudoscientific ones like fear of vaccines and denial of global warming. Which means of course that some politically charged issues — like the latter two — can also pertain properly to skeptical inquiry.

Second, let us turn to atheism. Once again: it is a *philosophical*, not a scientific position. Now, I have argued of course that any intelligent philosopher ought to allow her ideas to be informed by science, but philosophical inquiry is broader than science because it includes non-evidence based approaches, such as logic or more broadly reason-based arguments. This is both the strength and

the weakness of philosophy when compared to science: it is both broader and yet of course less prone to incremental discovery and precise answers. When someone, therefore, wants to make a *scientific* argument in favor of atheism — as Dawkins and Jerry Coyne seem to do — he is stepping outside the epistemological boundaries of science, thereby doing a disservice both to science and to intellectual inquiry. Consider again the example of a creationist who maintains in the face of evidence that the universe really is 6,000 years old, and that it only looks older because god arranged things in a way to test our faith. There is absolutely no empirical evidence that could contradict that sort of statement, but a philosopher can easily point out why it is unreasonable, and that furthermore it creates very serious theological quandaries.

Lastly, let's consider political philosophy. Again — as with atheism above — it would be silly for a political philosopher to reject pertinent empirical claims: we do have some evidence from the social sciences and from history about what happens when certain economic or political systems are seen at work in human societies. But political philosophy is fundamentally a matter of values: one starts with certain "rights" for instance that one thinks ought to be safeguarded, and then builds the best political/economic system that is likely to do the job. Talk of rights is, again, philosophical in nature, not empirical. One can (and should) defend what one means by "rights" and why one considers certain rights to be more fundamental than others. But all such discussions largely transcend empirical evidence (which, again, should not be ignored).

If the distinctions above are so clear, why, then, do we keep running into the mess with which I started this essay? Because the three areas in question do have a common underpinning: atheism, skeptical inquiry, and political philosophy are all exercises in critical thinking and rational analysis. The differences among them are in the relative role that philosophical and scientific/empirical considerations play in each case.

That is why, for instance, I can coherently say that Penn and Teller are wrong about their libertarianism and about their position on global warming: in the first case, I am talking about philosophy, in the second about science. There is, of course, much more leeway in the first than in the second case. That's also why there is no contradiction in me praising Maher for his political views and yet thinking of him as a hopelessly inept commentator when it comes to his opinions on medicine. To consider one more example, this is also how I can agree with Dawkins' and Coyne's philosophical positions (and disagree with "accommodationists" and yet distance myself from them on the ground that I think they are stretching the tools of science beyond what is reasonable.

All of this may seem confusing and perhaps even an

irrelevant exercise in hair-splitting, but it is in fact what makes discussions within the skeptic community – and society at large – so interesting and delicate. By all means, let's continue to argue about atheism, politics and UFOs. But let us be mindful of the fact that the types of arguments and evidence that are pertinent to one area do not necessarily carry over to another one. Which means that people should refrain from using the venerable mantle of skepticism to engage in silly notions like denying global warming or the efficacy of vaccines. That's an insult to critical analysis, which is the one thing we all truly cherish.

**ON "SPIRIT"
Carl Sagan**

(Excerpted from The Demon-Haunted World)

Spirit comes from the Latin word "to breathe." What we breathe is air, which is certainly matter, however thin. Despite usage to the contrary, there is no necessary implication in the word "spiritual" that we are talking of anything other than matter (including the matter of which the brain is made), or anything outside the realm of science. On occasion, I will feel free to use the word. Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. So are our emotions in the presence of great art, of music or literature, or of acts of exemplary selfless courage such as those of Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. The notion that science and spirituality are mutually exclusive does a disservice to both.

**OF MINARETS IN SWITZERLAND,
IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICA, AND
SCHOOL BOARDS IN EAST RAMAPO**

John Rafferty

In January PIQUE, I opined that I could not get politically-correctly outraged over the December vote by the Swiss to ban the construction of more minarets in their country, and SHSNY-founding-father Art Harris urged a reduction of the quotas on immigration from the Middle East. The issue also carried a report on the latest outrage by the Orthodox Jewish majority of Monsey, NY, (who don't send their kids to the East Ramapo public schools) on the East Ramapo school board.

The Monsey/East Ramapo question has been debated in these pages before (*see June, July, and September, 2009 PIQUE online at www.shsny.org – click on the PIQUE link*) and the express purpose of Art's essay and of mine in January was to provoke more debate.

They have.

David Vogel

Thanks for the challenge. I am convinced there is no compatibility between theocracy and democracy. The use of democratic processes in a power play to cripple a secular aim by a group of theocrats is the height of hypocrisy. Orthodox Jews [of the East Ramapo school board] should understand this and recuse themselves from a vote that affects a primarily secular situation. There should be a way of politically segregating people who have religious or philosophical reasons to oppose our constitutional principles.

I haven't sorted out the way in which this applies to the present Swiss/minarets matter, but I agree with Messrs. Rafferty and Harris. If I thought my life would be improved by moving to Niger or Lithuania I'd expect to obey the laws of that country. People coming here should accept our laws. We have rigorous tests for citizenship; we should have some for immigration.

It's complicated, and my thoughts are scattered, but I thank PIQUE's collaborators for bringing up things that others tiptoe around. I look forward to the next issue.

Dennis Middlebrooks

Regarding the "Swiss Question," I would have voted to ban the minarets without any hesitation. I would also have voted to ban any future Muslim immigration into Switzerland. The time has long since passed to stop treating Islam as just another religion rather than as a violent, misogynistic, theocratic ideology dedicated to the overthrow of secular democracies everywhere. Muslim immigrants in Europe have made no effort to conceal their contempt for the customs and traditions of their host nations, and refuse to assimilate. Attacks on Jews and gays, and sexual assaults on women on the part of Muslim men are increasingly common in Europe. Europeans cannot allow the legacy of the Renaissance and Enlightenment to be sacrificed on the altar of political correctness and a debased tolerance for an intolerant worldview.

Regarding Art Harris' view on immigration, I do not believe he goes far enough. I would welcome a ten year moratorium on all immigration into the USA and strict enforcement of our immigration laws. We already have over 300 million citizens and over ten million "undocumented workers" in this country, and the strain on our environment as well as on local, state and federal budgets is oppressive. When will we finally say "Enough already!"?

I can also attest to the fact that the influx of immigrants (legal or not) in New York has created a severe housing shortage and raised rents in working class neighborhoods, has effectively eliminated jobs for American citizens in the restaurant and construction

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SHSNY BOOK CLUB: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2010

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 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
DENIALISM:**

***How Irrational Thinking Hinders Scientific Progress,
Harms the Planet, and Threatens Our Lives*
by Michael Specter**

From the *New York Times Book Review*: "The optimistic view of science is that the theories advanced with its methods will have self-evident appeal to an educated public. Why, then, do people so often behave unscientifically? A sitting congressman claims he's seen a U.F.O.; a former *Playboy* model insists, against overwhelming evidence, that childhood vaccines cause autism; Las Vegas vacationers expect to beat the casinos; British Prime Minister Tony Blair treats his children with homeopathic remedies."

New Yorker staff writer Specter reveals that Americans have come to mistrust institutions and especially the institution of science more today than ever before.

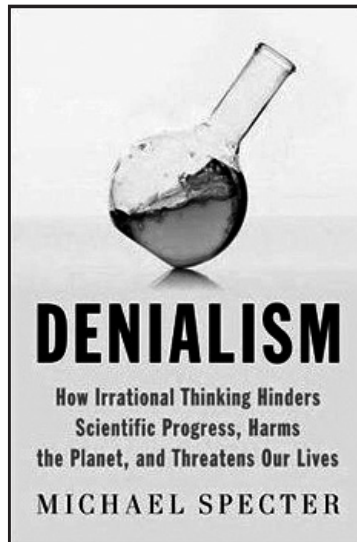
Denialists come from both ends of the political spectrum, but have one important trait in common: their willingness to replace the rigorous and open-minded skepticism of science with the inflexible certainty of ideological commitment. Specter calls this a war against progress, and makes an argument for a new Enlightenment, the revival of an approach to the physical world that was stunningly effective for hundreds of years.

*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



**Tuesday, March 23,
6:30-8:00 p.m.**

**at the Muhlenberg Library
*THIS WILL CHANGE
EVERYTHING:***

***Ideas That Will Shape the Future*
Edited by John Brockman**

Brockman and his collaborators at *edge.com* offer up 136 answers to the question: "What game-changing scientific ideas and developments do you expect to live to see?" Leo M. Chalupa and Alison Gopnik both consider the possibility of resetting the adult brain's plasticity – its capacity for learning – to childhood levels. Richard Dawkins suggests that reverse-engineering evolution could create a highly illuminating "continuum between every species and every other." Full of ideas, *This Will ...* offers dozens of ingenious ways to think about progress.

**Tuesday, April 27,
6:30-8:00 p.m.**

**at the Muhlenberg Library
*36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE
EXISTENCE OF GOD:*
*A Work of Fiction***

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

From Austin Dacey's review in *Free Inquiry*: "Her marvelous new novel, witty, wise, cativating and sumptuous ... is about many things – atheism, religion, mathematics, academia, the life of the mind, and the blessings and duties of genius. Throughout, it is about the subjective and the objective; about what it is like and what it is, and what it is like to live and believe somewhere in between. ...

"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."

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2010

MONDAY, FEB 8, 7:00 p.m.
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE
TO THE GALAXY

Part I

Here, in all its cheesy glory, is the award-winning 1981 Brit TV series



based on Douglas Adams' cult-favorite radio play and novel.

When Earth is destroyed

by a Vagon Demolition Fleet to make way for a new hyperspace bypass, Arthur Dent (Simon Jones) joins his friend Ford Prefect (David Dixon) on a galactic voyage that takes them from the remains of Earth to the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, and on a search for the Big Answers to the questions of Life, the Universe, and Everything.

We'll show Part II in March.

Apologies again: Yes, we originally scheduled "1984," but although it's listed on Netflix, it isn't available on DVD.

Coming Attractions

March 1: "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy - Part II"

April 5: "Religulous," Bill Maher's funny take on the three big religions.

May/June: What do you want to see? Come and tell us.

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 Stone Creek menu and prices online at www.stonecreeknyc.com

THERE'S STILL TIME TO RESERVE YOUR PLACE:

CALL 212-308-2165 or

E-MAIL EDITOR@SHSNY.ORG

Do it today - Advance Reservations are a Must!

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 6:30 p.m.
CHINESE BANQUET / DARWIN DAY DINNER &
SHSNY 22ND ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

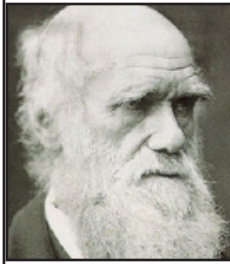
with

**Guest Speaker/
Entertainer and
Darwin Scholar**
RICHARD MILNER.

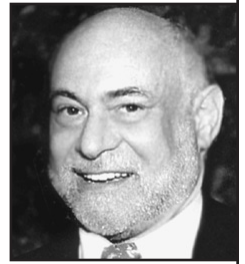
Plus the presentation

of the

**5TH ANNUAL
SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD**



Charles Darwin



Richard Milner

Halfway (sort-of) between SHSNY's anniversary (Jan 28) and Darwin Day (Feb 12) we'll gather at Red Egg restaurant downtown to celebrate both history-making events. We'll feast at a sumptuous Chinese banquet – from Dim Sum and Dumplings to Grand Marnier Prawns and Sautéed Steak Cubes (lots of veggie choices, too) – cast the final votes for the recipient of the not-so-coveted SHSNY 2009 Dumbth Award, and enjoy the wit and insights of Darwin scholar, author and first-class entertainer (his "Musical Evening with Charles Darwin" was one of our best evenings ever) – Richard Milner.

Red Egg Restaurant
202 Centre Street

(Map, directions - www.redeggnyc.com)

Cost for the evening, all inclusive: \$50

Cash bar.

To reserve: E-mail editor@shsnyc.org, or call 212-308-2165 (leave a call-back number).

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 12:30 p.m.
**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 like-minded humanists and rationalists for good pan-Asian food and lively talk in a charming East-side setting, is welcome. Bring friends!

Order off the menu; individual checks.

March brunch: 3/21

Continued from Page 5

industries, and has driven down wages and benefits as working class citizens are forced to compete with “coolie labor” from the Third World willing to accept 19th century working conditions.

Finally, one of the leading proponents of “open borders” in the USA is the Roman Catholic church, which welcomes the influx of millions of predominately traditional Catholic immigrants from Mexico and Latin America in the hope of transforming the USA into a conservative, Catholic country that will toe the Church line on gay rights, abortion, public funding of parochial schools, birth control, etc. For this reason alone, secular humanists should be wary of the impact of future immigration into this country, and not just from the Middle East.

Martine Reed

A democratic society must allow the free exercise of any legitimate religious practice. By legitimate, I mean practices which do not run afoul of the laws of the country. Furthermore, the democratic ideal is to allow all religions the same freedoms and privileges, and to impose on all religions the same constraints.

This democratic ideal has been seriously compromised by the recent Swiss referendum forbidding construction of minarets. Perhaps I should first express my suspicion and dislike of referendums as a way to legislate. A referendum is an appeal to emotions, which is not a reasonable way to enact legislation. It also lets the majority take measures which oppress whatever minority is the subject of the referendum.

It is deplorable that such a referendum even took place. I am certainly no friend of any religion, and I have an intense dislike for those totalitarian aspects of religion which are at the core of Islam. Nevertheless, there are better ways to prevent a group of people from infringing upon the liberty of others. In the case of minarets, one could look at zoning laws and at nuisance ordinances.

A sovereign country whose laws protect women would do well to scrutinize whether immigrants have several wives (they are struggling with that issue in France); whether visitors or tourists come in the country with slaves, whether female circumcision or underage marriage is practiced in violation of the law, etc. There are certainly a number of astoundingly shocking issues which should be addressed. Besides them, the minaret is just a symbol, and it is never productive to center a fight on symbols rather than substance.

Stan Friedland

As a practicing secular humanist I try to be tolerant of the belief systems and actions of others as long as they are harmless to others and themselves, both in

intent and in their actions. Given the realities of our world today, there is a self-defensive need to practice what I call, “pragmatic tolerance,” meaning that a person, community or nation must cease their tolerance when the beliefs and actions of others show a harmful intent toward their well being. The latter clearly has been the demonstrated record of Muslims in virtually every instance where they emigrate to other countries in sizable numbers. Every European country with a growing Muslim population is experiencing their hatred and their violent activities to an alarming degree.

Switzerland, with its recent vote, is acting not with intolerance, but with a realistic motive of self-defense in restricting the growth of a people that would be harmful to the rest of Swiss society. That is certainly justified and “pragmatic” based on the empirical evidence of what Muslims have been doing in other European countries.

Although they did not spell it out in the same way, I fully agree with Messrs Rafferty and Harris as they agreed with the vote of the Swiss people and the subsequent action not to build any further mosques. Why aid and abet a people that, by their hostile and vicious actions, make it perfectly clear that they are out to destroy your way of life? That wouldn't be tolerance. It would indeed be stupidity!

Alexander Nussbaum

A rabbi in an Orthodox yeshiva I had the misfortune to attend liked to say, “You have no rights.” Of course he was right, the concept of individual rights runs counter to Orthodox Judaism as well as to Islam.

Another thing I heard back then was the prohibition on looking at a woman's hair, which I was forcefully reminded of by the Christmas-day “underwear bomber,” who was quoted as saying “the hair of a woman can easily arouse.”

There is a direct connection between the sexual code the underwear bomber was taught and his actions. Psychologist James W. Prescott showed that cultures that repress sexuality and physical contact promote violence. Humanists should use the available research to boldly proclaim the moral superiority of sexual freedom over barbaric sexual prohibitions. Ironically, conservative Christians like to think they are sexually restrictive, but they are often not, certainly when compared to Islam or Orthodox Judaism.

Switzerland is engaged in a life-and-death struggle to preserve not just Swiss culture but any freedom. France, Germany, and all of Europe are engaged in the same struggle. Except for places like Britanistan that have already thrown in the towel. In Britanistan honor killings and female genital mutilation are a fact of life, and *The Three Little Pigs* is unacceptable in school libraries. Whatever Switzerland is doing to defend itself may

be much too little too late.

PIQUE has had an ongoing discussion about the situation in Monsey entailing ultra-Orthodox Jews closing a public school. But the type of schools run by ultra-Orthodox Jews in Monsey constitute child abuse and should not be allowed. As one yeshiva principal has been quoted as saying, "If television wasn't banned, we wouldn't have kids studying and learning Torah 16 to 18 hours a day."

Children and adolescents have the right to be taught the best available uncensored mainstream science, to be exposed to mainstream culture, the right to dress in standard secular clothing styles, to explore their sexuality, to attend co-educational schools, to strive for self-fulfillment. Neither parents nor the collective they are part of have a right to deny young people these rights.

Madrassas and ultra-Orthodox yeshivas have no place in a free, humanistic society. Religions have no rights; only individuals have rights, and the individual does not belong to the religion, culture, ethnic group or race. The individual does not belong to a collective, whether of the religious-fascist or Marxist-fascist variety, those two fundamentally being the same thing. Can the rights a once free and individualistic United States boldly declared unalienable – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – exist for women, for gays, for Jews, for humans, anywhere Muslims form even a sizable minority?

Another irony: conservative Christians rail against "humanism," but may be the last defenders of American values, which include the concepts of individual rights and individualism, both products of humanism, while all too many of those who call themselves "humanists" seem enamored with socialist totalitarianism and Islamic fascism. "Progressives" and socialists have formed a Hitler-Stalin alliance with Islamic fascists. It's a sad day when conservative Christians prove to value the humanistic values they claim to oppose more than humanists do.

The post-modern, post-Christian, post-scientific, post-capitalist, post-individualistic West views defending its achievements as unacceptable. But tolerance of the intolerant is intolerance. Those who support the rights of Nazis are Nazis. And as George Orwell put it, "Pacifism is objectively pro-fascist."

The movement whose purpose is to destroy all freedom, the very concept of rational thought, and all that humanity has achieved since the Dark Ages will succeed in doing just that. Humanists and "progressives" seem to be witting or unwitting accomplices. Fifty years from now, nowhere will evolution or the first holocaust be taught. The second holocaust will have already occurred, and all of humanity's great literature, science and art will have been incinerated as contrary to sharia religious law

that has already been declared "inevitable" by the "progressive" head of the already obsolete Church of England. Is this the legacy humanists want?

Barbara Friedberg

I don't know what the Swiss should do. I address the initial complaint about the liberal reader's mental reflex and counter-reflex.

Whenever indignation presumes the target's usual high standards or ethical habits, perhaps even basing the anger on them, the observer may and in fact should keep close watch on whether this presumption is maintained consistently in what is said. Too often it is not. I think we should try to formulate the denunciation with the assumptions attached. "It's alright for us to ban all but our own religion, but we depend on your scorning this practice." Or, "We often kill civilians exclusively, because our cause is just, but you shouldn't do it even accidentally." I think what happens is that such statements invite questions about the wider context, more of the total story. That's fine, and one should encourage it.

The problem comes about because of the ambiguity of contexts: private, public, or global. Suppose a teacher says to a first-rate student: "This is a terrible job!" The student understands the context and won't say: "Unfair! Jim there can't even spell correctly." Or if a Yankee ace can't seem to find the plate one day, and a disgusted fan says, "Why, my ten-year-old son can pitch better than that," no one would take that as a simple claim.

But when extreme denunciations of our government are made, it is not always certain if an unqualified comparison with other countries is intended or not. Here's one from 1975, David Dellinger I think, in the Sheep Meadow in New York: "America is the most militaristic country in the world!" Are we to understand that he expects us to consider the world – from China to Peru, as it were – before we judge? Or are we to take his remark with a grain of salt? Or does he count on the audience going blank and accepting it straight? Truly, in such cases I don't know whether the speaker expects the audience to know sufficient background or means to hide it from them.

Of course, all this doesn't mean that one can't criticize some of the same actions as the ideologues do, if one gets the framework set up correctly.

Harvey Offenhartz

Regarding the Harris article: Where have I heard that song before?

Have there not been "good reasons," "special reasons," to discourage immigration of ethnic and/or religious peoples from our shores, before?

Difficult as it may seem, we shouldn't add to the knee-jerk panic about Muslim immigration. We, the US,

must maintain our democratic society and principles, or all will be lost.

P.S.: As for Saudi Arabia, when I was in the Air Force and my unit was deployed there for Temporary Duty, I was asked, i.e.: ordered, to stay behind in Texas. That was my first confrontation with authorized, official discrimination, because my dog tags had a "J."

Chic Schissel

Re: minarets in Switzerland. This produces the most tormenting of problems: do we live by our stated ideals, or do we relax and let go of these ideals on the pretense of necessity, exposing ourselves as hypocrites?

The facts seem to indicate that radical Islam is at war with us, nor have they kept this a secret. We humanists want to think that most of Islam is composed of peace-loving folks who do not support terrorism. Were this true we would expect massive protests against the terrorists by the Islamic majority, but we have not noticed any. And we would expect loud statements from Islamic religious leaders clearly saying that their religion does not support suicide bombing and the murder of innocents. But we listen in vain for such declarations.

Hitler made no bones about his intentions, and he wasn't taken seriously. Is it time to take Islamic fanaticism seriously? Is it appropriate for us to pressure Islamic religious and political leadership to make a clear statement to their people that they oppose murder, that suicide bombers will not be rewarded in heaven, that it is preferable to live than to die, that they do not intend to force their religious beliefs on the rest of us and make us live by sharia law? In the absence of such a statement would we be justified in military action, perhaps massive, perhaps leading to a world-wide cataclysm? And if we do not take such action now, will it be much worse later on?

The world is beset with massive problems: diminishing resources of food, energy, and raw materials, threats to the environment, overpopulation, poor understanding of science by the great majority, and religious superstition. I remember Ring Lardner Jr., years ago, writing that unless we (the "civilized" world) apply more wisdom to our actions the third world will rise up and bomb us back to the Stone Age. I think it's time for us to behave more wisely, whatever that takes, and require the rest of the world to do the same.

P.S.: The town of "G" (short for Geneva) would be a great location for a Swiss minaret: The Minaret in G.

JESUS & MO SETTLE THE DEBATE

Mohammed: Islam is the one true religion. When you know the truth it makes no sense to allow people to propagate falsehoods. That is why we don't allow churches to be built in Muslim countries.

Jesus: But everyone thinks their own religion is the true one, and there's no way of proving which one is right.

Mo: I don't care about reality. I care about the truth.

Jesus: Me, too, but shouldn't the two correspond closely?

Mo: Only if you're one of those secular fundamentalists.

WHAT'S YOUR PHILOSOPHY TYPE?

Philosopher Massimo Pigliucci (see page 4) has forwarded a fun website (www.markvernon.com) run by one Mark Vernon, author of *Plato's Podcasts: The Ancients' Guide to Modern Living*. You can work through "a short questionnaire to discover your ancient Athenian guru" at whatsyourphilosophytype.com.

Who are you most like? Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus? Zeno of Citium, founder of Stoicism? Pyrrho, the first Skeptic, or Cynic Diogenes of Sinope? Find out, just for fun. No advanced degrees awarded.

THE DIETARY BENEFITS OF RELIGION

Dennis Middlebrooks

"If I didn't believe in Jesus Christ, I would take out the liver of Pastor Kim, chew it up and eat it."

So said Nam Sik Park, a member of the Evergreen Presbyterian Church in Flushing, Queens, of the Reverend Stephen Kim, whom Park and three other church members regard as a "false prophet."

All four were excommunicated by Rev. King, who should give thanks that Mr. Park believes in Jesus Christ and is not, say, a Unitarian or Reform Jew.

IN TEXAS HE'D HAVE BEEN PROMOTED

Steven Arizmendi, a sixth-grade teacher at Junior High School 220 in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, has been reprimanded for selling students a book that tells how to "recognize those serving Satan and bring them to Jesus."

The book, *He Came to Set the Captives Free*, tells the story of a God-fearing doctor who wins over a Devil-worshipping young woman. It is billed as an "honest, in-depth account of Satan's activities today."

So, what does Mr. Arizmendi teach? Science.

MURDERS 'R' US

Jill Lepore

(Excerpted from "Rap Sheet" in The New Yorker, November 9, 2009, reprinted on delanceyplace.com, 11/9/09)

The United States has the highest homicide rate of any affluent democracy, nearly four times that of France and the United Kingdom, and six times that of Germany. Why? Historians haven't often asked this question. ...In the archives, murders are easier to count than other crimes. ... Murders enter the historical record through coroners' inquests, court transcripts, parish led-

gers, and even tombstones. ... Given enough archival research, historians can count, with fair accuracy, the frequency with which people of earlier eras killed one another, with this caveat: the farther back you go in time – and the documentary trail doesn't go back much farther than 1300 – the more fragmentary the record.

In Europe, homicide rates, conventionally represented as the number of murder victims per hundred thousand people in the population per year, have been falling for centuries. ... In feuding medieval Europe, the murder rate hovered around thirty-five. Duels replaced feuds. Duels are more mannered; they also have a lower body count. By 1500, the murder rate in Western Europe had fallen to about twenty. Courts had replaced duels. By 1700, the murder rate had dropped to five. Today, that rate is generally well below two, where it has held steady, with minor fluctuations, for the past century.

In the United States, the picture could hardly be more different. The American homicide rate has been higher than Europe's from the start, and higher at just about every stage since. It has also fluctuated, sometimes wildly. During the Colonial period, the homicide rate fell, but in the nineteenth century, while Europe's kept sinking, the U.S. rate went up and up. In the twentieth century, the rate in the United States dropped to about five during the years following the Second World War, but then rose, reaching about eleven in 1991. It has since fallen once again, to just above five, a rate that is, nevertheless, twice that of any other affluent democracy.

Ed: Why? Might the fact that in most of the U.S. even felons and psychiatric patients can legally own a semi-automatic assault rifle have something to do with it?

But what about the "law-abiding, upstanding community leaders who merely seek to exercise their right to self-defense" that "concealed carry" advocates (like 2009 Dumbth nominee Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, who wants more concealed guns in Central Park) argue should be allowed to carry their guns anywhere?

According to a recent report by The Violence Policy Center, which tracks news reports of incidents involving concealed carry firearms, those "community leaders" have killed at least nine law enforcement officers, in addition to 108 private citizens, since May 2007. – JR

2010 LOOKS LIKE A GREAT YEAR IN DUMBTH

The election will have ended and the winner of the 2009 Dumbth Award announced at our February 3 gala almost before the ink is dry on these pages, and already 2010 promises a bumper crop of the witless and willfully stupid. January alone delivered four deserving dopes for the next, 2010, award. And we even have, thanks to the keen conservative eye of New York Philosophy's John Broughton – ready for this? – a liberal nominee!

Brit Hume, Christian Missionary

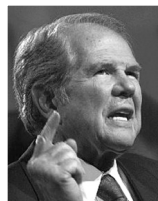
The year was only three days old when we turned over a rock and found our first nominee. On Fox News, clueless commentator Brit Hume offered Tiger Woods this self-satisfied and gratuitous advice on how to handle the sex scandal that has ruined his marriage and career:



"The extent to which he can recover seems to me depends on his faith. He is said to be a Buddhist. I don't think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. My message to Tiger would be: 'Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world.'"

Let's see, who should oversee Tiger's conversion? The Rev. Jimmy Swaggert? Maybe the Rev. Jim Bakker, or Ted Haggard, or ...

Pat Robertson, Historian

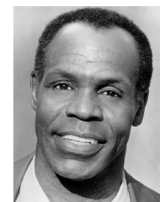


You'd think that having won the 2006 Dumbth Award and a Lifetime-Achievement-in-Dumbth accolade, Rev. Pat would have retired his motor mouth. But in a January 13 interview on the Christian Broadcasting Network, as buildings were still falling in Haiti, he gave this reality-bending explanation of why the quake hit:

"Something happened a long time ago in Haiti They were under the heel of the French ... and they got together and swore a pact to the Devil. They said, 'We will serve you if you'll get us free from the French.' True story. And so the Devil said, 'OK, it's a deal.' They kicked the French out. The Haitians revolted and got themselves free. Ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other."

Danny Glover, Scientist

Not as crazy as the Reverend Pat, and with his heart in the right place but his head in the clouds, seriously science-challenged actor Danny Glover, in a January 14 interview on GritTV, blamed the earthquake in Haiti on global warming. Confusing atmospheric with tectonics, he passionately declared that:



"What happened to Haiti [was] because of global warming [and] climate change. We see what we did at the climate summit in Copenhagen [he means what we didn't do], this is the response, this is what happens."

Craig T. Nelson, Humanitarian



The now very rich actor, everyone's favorite high-school "Coach" from the old sitcom of the same name, appeared on Glenn Beck's show January 16, and complained that he was "really thinking about" not

paying income taxes “ever again” because those taxes pay for government programs [e.g., bailouts] he doesn’t believe in, arguing:

“I’ve been on welfare and food stamps ... did anyone help me?”

THE RIDICULOUS CLAIMS QUIZ

Before we leave the subject of the willfully witless and colossally dumb, take the “Which Ridiculous Claim Was Actually Made? Quiz.” Who made the following ridiculous claims?

- 1) Global warming is a hoax perpetrated by the elite members of Hollywood.
- 2) Barack Obama is potentially an undocumented immigrant because he has not shown his original birth certificate from Hawaii.
- 3) 2009 was the coldest year on record.
- 4) Most autistic children are just faking it to get their parents’ attention, and parents need to tell them to “sit up and act like a man.”
- 5) The United States will split into three separate countries sometime in 2010.
- 6) There was a triangular-shaped UFO craft hovering over a congressman’s balcony, and he had a very moving encounter with it.
- 7) Dick Cheney is a kind and caring man.
- 8) The Democratic Party is secretly controlled by communists and fascists, intent on purposely destroying

the economy in order to enact martial law and turn the United States into a dictatorship.

9) The government is building secret detention camps, using FEMA as a cover.

10) Illegal aliens are bringing leprosy into the U.S.

Answers

1) Sen. Jim Inhofe	6) Rep. Dennis Kucinich
2) Lou Dobbs	7) No one ever said that
3) Sean Hannity	8) Glenn Beck
4) Michael Savage	9) Glenn Beck
5) Russian Igor Pannarin	10) Lou Dobbs

MARCUS AURELIUS ON THE GOOD LIFE

Live a good life. If there are gods and they are just, they will not care how devout you have been, but will welcome you based on the virtues you have lived by. If there are gods, but unjust, then you should not want to worship them. If there are no gods, then you will be gone, but will have lived a noble life that will live on in the memories of your loved ones.

MARCH PIQUE WILL BE LATE

The entire editorial and production staff will be in Miami in frigid mid-February (*nyah-nyah*), so March PIQUE will be a few days late. No, this is not an apology. – JR

Last Call!
 SHSNY 22nd Anniversary
 & Darwin Day Banquet
 Page 7
 More on Minarets
 Page 5
 What's Your Philosophy
 Type?
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